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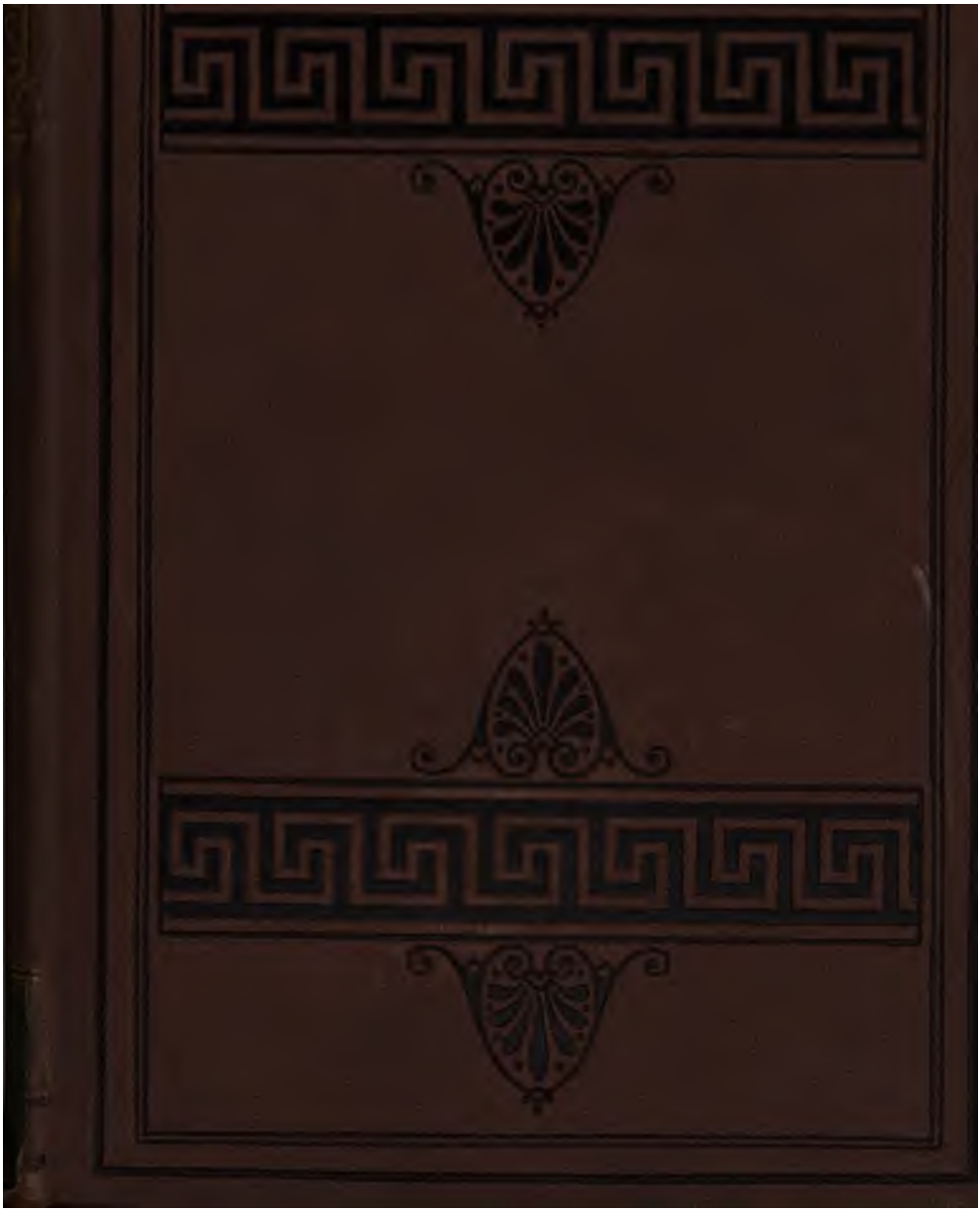

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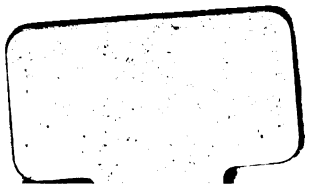

THE

VIKINGS OF THE BALTIC

A Tale of the North in the Tenth Century.

BY

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THE

VIKINGS OF THE BALTIC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HUNT AFTER EARL HACON.

We now return to the Vikings. After the sack of Tunsberg, they had moved north along the coast, passing through the net-work of islands which fringe the shore, and landing every afternoon to waste and harry the farms which lay nearest to them. This continual halting made their progress slow, and gave, as we have seen, the Earl time to collect his forces in ships and men; but it could not be helped, for the cattle which they slaughtered each day were necessary to feed the fleet. So it happened that it was more than a fortnight before they appeared off Stad; nor would have reached that headland so soon had they stopped to search each island, or fjord, which they passed. Let the reader imagine how long it would take

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a fleet that was sailing from the South of Scotland to Lochinver to reach that harbour, if it sailed into every firth, and searched every island on its way; the case would be much the same in Norway, except that as the fjords are deeper and more numerous, and the islands off the coast ten-fold as many as those off Scotland, the delay would have been far greater. The Vikings, therefore, contented themselves with plundering the islands and shores close to where they ran in for the night. With the dawn they passed on, having ruined the neighbouring farmers and burnt their homesteads, but having spared many others, which, in their haste to get North, they could not reach. What they did was enough to raise the whole country to resist them, and as soon as they had passed one point on the coast, many a good ship, which had lain snug behind some island, or in the bight of a fjord, put out into the open sea, and following what was called the outer course, while the Vikings pursued the inner passage among the isles, turned them by superior speed, and doubling Stad before them, swelled the force of Earl Hacon, and roused

the wrath of all true Norwegians by telling the insults and cruelties which the Vikings had heaped on the freemen all along the Southern Coast.

At last, as we have heard, the Vikings were descried by the warders off the Isthmus at Stad. Their arrival was now a mere matter of reckoning, for when they had reached Stad it was but twenty sea-miles, or knots, to the Island of Hod, where Earl Hacon's ships had first of all been gathered together. The Earl, whose head-quarters as we have seen were on that island, had withdrawn his fleet from that place of muster as soon as he was sure that the Vikings were approaching, and had drawn it up in Hjoringsvoe, a bay, or voe, which ran into the mainland on the other side of the island. At the same time he passed the word round from farm to farm, and isle to isle, that no one should dare to say where his fleet was, or, in fact, to say whether he had gathered any force at all to meet the Vikings.

Sigvald and his captains were therefore in this difficulty, they came to fight an unseen

foe: unless they could find Earl Hacon they could not kill him, or drive him out of Norway; but here they had come thus far North, and so far from attacking Earl Hacon, they could not even discover where he was.

After passing Stad, they made for the Her isles, off the coast of South Mœren, and there they halted, and hoped soon to bring the crafty Earl to battle.

Further in towards the shore lay the Island of Hod, under which the Earl's fleet had so lately mustered, and from which it had only moved a few hours before, to take up a better position in the bight of Hjoringsvoe.

Besides their want of knowledge as to the Earl's movements, they were in want of food, and they had not been long in the harbour, under the Her isles, before the eyes of these plunderers were turned on the Island of Hod, which, of good size and plainly inhabited and cultivated, lay temptingly before them.

As usual, the ships of Vagn and his foster-father lay side by side. It was late ere they ran into their quarters for the night, but with the first streak of dawn, which at the end of

November shows itself not very soon in the North, the foster-father and foster-child were together on Vagn's ship.

"I should have thought better of this Earl, foster-father, if I had not tried him now and found him wanting. This is hunting a fox in a heap of stones, where there was never a fox. Why did he not meet us before we came so far? and now that we have doubled that great headland yonder,"—pointing to Stad—"why does he not come out into the open and show himself?"

"Earl Hacon will show himself all in good time, boy," said his worldly-wise foster-father; "but rely on it, he will not break cover till he is driven to it like other foxes. But what is more to my mind than puzzling our brains about Earl Hacon, is meat. All mine is used up, and all yours, too, I'll be bound. My men complain that I have brought them hither to starve. What say you? Shall we be first in the field, and land on yon isle, and slaughter beeves and sheep and goats, which I see browsing and grazing in flocks and herds?"

"With all my heart, foster-father. I am for

anything but a quiet life, for when I am doing nothing I am ever thinking of Ingibeorg."

"May all the Hillogres and Trolls carry off Ingibeorg, and the whole race of womankind. Here we are out on a great cruize, and in want of fresh meat, and you vex me with love and Ingibeorg. The Trolls fly away with her, I say. Besides, recollect you have to kill her father before you win her. So long as he lives, no Ingibeorg for you."

"Let us launch our boats, foster-father, and waste no more time in words," said Vagn, with a melancholy look. "The future is black and gloomy; it is best to be doing something."

"Just so," said the rough old Welshman. "When a young man begins to think of a young woman, he had better do something useful—slaughter an ox, or slay a man, and then he will soon forget her. There is nothing that washes out love so soon as blood. We have tried salt water long enough, now let us try blood, even though it be that of oxen and goats."

The boats were soon launched, and Beorn and Vagn steered each his own for the Island

of Hod, which, in the fresh morning light, lay smiling before them,—the flocks and herds grazing on the hills and in fields, and the smoke curling above the shingled roof of the wooden homestead, then as now stained red with oxide of iron, which was then called simply iron-rust.

They were not long in making the shore; and the first thought of Vagn and Beorn was to secure as many cattle as they could, leaving the homestead to take its turn last.

The farm was a rich one, as might be seen both by the broad tilths, off which rye and barley and oats had been reaped and piled in stacks, as well as by the number of beasts.

As soon as they had gathered a number of these animals together, they drove them in Viking-wise down to the shore, meaning to slaughter them close to the water's edge, and then send off the spoil to the ships in the boats.

Already had the shore been thronged with beeves, and already had Beorn and Vagn brandished their axes, as they chose out the fattest and sleekest of the herd, when they were turned from their purpose by the shouts

of a man, who came running at full speed down to the landing place.

"Bide a bit, foster-father," said Vagn; "let us hear what this bold fellow has to say."

Down came the carle, who was well stricken in years, and when he stood face to face with the leaders he bawled out—

"Who is the captain of this company, and what is his name?"

"That is soon told," said Vagn, "and many a man would not have come so far, or so fast, to ask an idle question, which, besides, might cost him his life. But if you must know my name, it is Vagn, the son of Aki. But your name, pray, what is it?"

"My name is Wolf," said the carle, "and what is more, I own these kine and sheep and goats which you are about to slaughter. Methinks though, there is a chance, and not so far off either, of a greater slaughter than of butchering my kine and goats, if what one hears of the purpose of you Jomsvikings be true."

"What meanest thou, man?" cried Beorn.

"I mean," said Wolf, "that methinks it is strange such great warriors as you should waste

your time over oxen and sheep and goats, when you might easily bay the Bear himself."

"What Bear?" cried Vagn.

"The Bear," said Wolf, "who will soon swallow you all up unless you take him unawares."

"Tell us out-right," cried Vagn, "if you know aught of Earl Hacon's doings or whereabouts; for if you will speak sooth as to that, and we can know where he is, you may be off about your business, with your kine and goats. And now then, what tidings have you to tell, and what do you know about Earl Hacon?"

"Oh!" said Wolf, "he lay here yester even late, with one ship inside this Isle of Hod, in the bight of Hjoringsvoe, and ye may slay him if you will, for there he lies waiting for his men."

"Now," said Vagn, "you shall have bought peace for yourself, and all your flocks and herds. Come on board with us, and show us the way to the Earl."

"That is not meet," said Wolf, "and I will not fight against the Earl, for it is unbecoming. But I will show you the way with all my heart,

until ye get well into the Voe, if you will; but I will have it first understood that I shall be let go in peace as soon as ye see what you will meet in the Voe."

"That is but fair," said Vagn, "and now come on board."

So said, so done. Wolf went on board Vagn's ship, and the Vikings left the cattle to take care of themselves, while Beorn and Vagn took counsel on what was best to be done.

"We are bound to go back and tell the Captain, foster-father," said Vagn.

"So we are, boy, worse luck," growled out the old Viking.

"Why foster-father, we shall still have the best of the good news. We are ready for action, men and ships. We may well settle our score with the Earl, before one of them can come up."

"Very true, very true, boy. Let us back our ships towards the fleet, call out the news that we know where the Earl is, and then dash off for the Voe."

This was done. It was still early in the day, and while Sigvald was thinking of his

morning meal, the news came to him that Vagn and Beorn, who had crossed to Hod to forage, were backing their ships into the haven.

"Whatever is in the wind now?" said Sigvald. "Something surely. I will go down to the shore and hear."

As the two ships neared the strand, still backing, Sigvald, with a stentorian voice, hailed them: "What news?"

"Good!" shouted back Beorn, in a voice still louder, across the smooth sea. "We have found the Earl, and go to seek him!"

As the shout died away, the rowers ceased backing, and plied their oars, under the force of which the war-ships shot across the ripples.

"Found the Earl!" cried Sigvald, "and go to seek him! Can it be that we have caught that wily fox unawares? Up every man and follow them with the whole fleet. Something tells me there is guile in this."

In a few minutes every able-bodied man was making for his ship, and there was a roar of voices and a rush of feet as the Vikings ran down to the shore to get on board. After all,

it was but a short start that Vagn and Beorn had, but it was enough.

The scene which we have described with Wolf lay on the outside of the Isle of Hod. Further out seaward, separated from Hod by a narrow sound, lay the Her Isles, where the Viking fleet lay. To reach Hjoringsvoe, in the bight of which Earl Hacon was supposed to be lurking with one or two ships, the Vikings had to round Hod, on the inner or land side of which was the channel into the Voe, which was screened from view by one or two islets at its very mouth, and besides ran into the main land in a slanting direction.

It was not, therefore, possible for any one to see clearly how many ships were in the Voe till those islets had been passed, and the bend reached, after which the Voe opened out into a horse-shoe bay.

The sturdy crews of Beorn and Vagn were not long in rounding Hod. Each captain steered his own ship, Vagn leading the way with Wolf as his pilot, who, as they shot through the water, begged him to take it easily, for they would be there quite in time to catch the Earl.

"But how can we know that he may not steal out, carle?" said Vagn.

"Never fear, never fear, Viking!" answered Wolf. "Earl Hacon is not the man to run away from his foeman, even when taken unawares. Be sure you will find him in yonder Voe."

By this time they were steering straight for its mouth; in a little while they passed the islets and ran into the Voe itself. A few minutes more brought them to the bend, and as they turned it and saw for the first time right into its depths, all eyes were strained forward to catch sight of the Earl's solitary ship.

Then arose a cry of astonishment on board both ships when far away at the very bottom of the Voe, they descried a great fleet of ships drawn up in a crescent, in front of which lay here and there islets and rocks awash.

"Three hundred of them at least," cried Vagn's bowman, who stood first in the prow.

"Three hundred," said Vagn, as he turned to Wolf, whom he supposed to be still at his side.

But the wily carle had watched his turn, and well knowing the reward his treachery would find at the hands of the Vikings when they saw so many ships instead of the one or two which he had promised them, had leapt overboard, and was swimming briskly to an islet before Vagn missed him.

"Ha!" said Vagn, as he caught up a spear, "'tis never too late to pay a man his wages though those wages be death."

As he said this, he hurled the spear with unerring aim at the swimmer, who was buffeting the water with lusty strokes.

Wolf heard the spear as it hurtled through the air, and sought to escape it, but seawater is a sluggish element, and the spear was quicker than the sturdy swimmer. At his middle Vagn had aimed, and through his middle it passed. As he went down in death, Wolf held up his arms high above his head, a few bubbles and a patch of red on the green sea, and the days of the traitor to the Vikings, but true son of his country, were over.

"Back water, boys," cried Vagn, as soon as he saw how well his spear had sped. "Back

water hard, and let us take counsel with my foster-father."

As soon as Beorn saw that Wolf had leapt overboard, and that Vagn was backing his ship, he backed too. The war-snakes were soon alongside of each other, and without leaving them, the captains discussed the position of affairs.

"Caught thyself, boy," roared out Beorn, "as the fox said to the bear when his snout was fast in the cleft log. What's to be done, now?"

"We must wait for the rest, of course," said Vagn. "We have found the fox at least, and a wily one, though we have not caught him. If we get his skin, others will share it with us, that is all."

"Yes, foster-child," said the old Viking, "that is just about all. That skin will never be stripped off without a good tussle; and, to tell the truth, a good sea fight, broadside to broadside, with boarding and blood, is much more to my mind than stealing on your foe like those Finns and Lapps up north and cutting his throat when he is asleep and powerless. So hurrah!

for a good old fight, and let Norway be the prize for which both sides fight this day. And now there is naught more to be said, except that you paid that carle off neatly, boy, who tried to lure us to our doom."

"The wretch!" said Vagn. "Yes! I paid him. Would that I might so pay Thorkell of Leira in the coming fight, and so win fair Ingibeorg."

"Always Ingibeorg!" exclaimed Beorn in wrath. "The last thing at night and the first in the morning is Ingibeorg. When a man is in love, as you call it, he can't even think of killing his foeman in fair fight, but he must mix his mistress up with her father, and think to win her favour by cutting her father's throat. Keep love and battle apart, boy, as they ought to be kept. Why spoil all the joy and glory of battle by puling and whining after Ingibeorg, or any other woman? How I wish the old gods, or this new god, had made us all men. It would have saved a world of trouble."

"Yes, Beorn, perhaps," said Vagn. "But perhaps, too, you would never have come into this world of trouble at all."

"Very true," said the inveterate woman-hater. "All I say is, if I had made the world, I would have made it without women. They are the bane of life."

Then he burst out into a roar of laughter which seemed never likely to stop. All this time, as the ebb tide was running out of the voe, the ships had drifted beyond the bend, and towards the islets at its mouth.

"See, Beorn," said Vagn. "Yonder comes Earl Sigvald with the vanguard of the fleet round the point at Hod. Let us paddle back with the tide and tell him the news. We know where the fox lies though we do not bring his skin."

CHAPTER II.

EARL HACON IN HIS CAMP.

We have already seen that the worldly wise Sigvald suspected the trustworthiness of the news which Beorn and Vagn had brought him. In those days every ship, and most of all ships fitted out on such an undertaking as this, was ready for action at the shortest notice. Sigvald therefore, and Bui, and Thorkell the Tall, and the other captains had only to step on board with their men, and they were ready to engage any force in the North. The Viking Captain knew too well the character of the man whom he had vowed to destroy, to yield himself to the fancy that Norway was to be won and Earl Hacon pulled down without a hard struggle. Such a victim was not to be offered up without great shedding of blood. Earl Sigvald followed the two adventurers from the fleet with all his ships manned by all his men. In those days

there were no malingerers and no sick. One reason only was ever given or accepted as an excuse from mustering at roll-call,—deep wounds, or death.

It was not long, therefore, before the whole Viking fleet was astir, rowing in the wake of their two companions. As the great body pulled with might and main, there was a roar of oars as the ships swept round the southernmost point of Hod. Midway in the sound, between that island and the main, Beorn and Vagn met their comrades. The fleet then backed, while Vagn ran his ship along side that of Sigvald to report what he had seen.

"What news, Vagn, Aki's son?" said the Captain. "You two have come back not quite so fast as you went."

"Good luck we came back at all, Captain," said Vagn. "Thinking to catch Earl Hacon napping, we have found him wide awake. Inside yonder, the Voe swarms with ships."

"As I thought," said Sigvald. "A man must rise early to catch the Barn Earl asleep. Tell me how many ships think you are there inside?"

"'Tis hard to say, Captain," said Vagn, "for we only caught a glance at them, and there were rocks and skerries between, but we could see that they stretched from shore to shore in the shape of a horse-shoe. May be, they were twice as many as our force."

"Then there is all the more glory to be got," said Sigvald. "We will row in and give them battle, as soon as our men have had their morning meal, for we started in such haste at your hail, that few of us have broken our fast."

"Quite right, Captain," said old Beorn, who now stood by his foster-child's side. "In Palnatoki's time we always fought on full bellies. Naught so puts the life into a man as a good meal."

"Methinks, Beorn," said Sigvald, "we have harder work before us this day than even Palnatoki himself ever had to do. We Vikings will need all our strength before night falls. So let every man eat and drink while he can. Many a man will never taste bite or sup again."

"Just so; and quite right, too, noble

Captain," said the old Viking. "It makes my old blood flow like a mill-stream to think that I shall once more be in the thick of a good sea fight. Of course many of us will sup to-night —the believers in Odin with him and his champions in Valhalla; those who trust in the White Christ, with him and the angels in what the Monks call Paradise; and those who trust only in themselves, as I and many more on both sides—well!" he added, with a chuckle as if putting a question to himself—"well! whither shall we go? I am sure I can't tell. Somewhither, I am sure; for, if there is a place kept for one set of brave men in Valhalla, and for another in that Paradise, it is plain that a third set, as brave or it may be braver than the rest, will not be left shivering and starving out in the cold while the others are warm over their meat and mead."

As the old Viking ended this, for him, very long speech, he turned on his heel, and paced the poop aft. The Captain looked at Vagn and laughed, and said—

"There at least goes a heart as brave as Tyr, and as trusty as Leding, the fetter of

the Æsir. Would that every man in the band were as trusty and brave as old Beorn!"

"Would they were, Captain," said Vagn. "I hope we shall all of us this day be mindful of our vows."

As he said this, he looked steadfastly at the Captain, and shook his head, as Sigvald, too, turned on his heel and paced forward.

Thus left alone, Vagn went on to himself: "His vow is the hardest of all, and all the rest hang on it. If he fulfils his, mine will follow of itself. Earl Hacon once down, it will be not long ere I stand across the body of Thorkell of Leira."

At that moment, the horns on board the fleet sounded by Earl Sigvald's orders for the morning meal; which the men took in haste, as the ships—for the tide was now slack and there was no wind—lay idly on the water. Let us leave them there awhile, and see what was doing in Earl Hacon's camp.

We have already seen that the Voe, or bay, in which one of the bloodiest sea-fights of those unruly times was on the eve of happening, ran up into the main land with a bend or elbow;

just at the bend too the land was high on either side and the channel narrow. As soon as the elbow was turned the Voe opened out and ended after entering still further into the land in a broad horseshoe bay, towards which the land, now no longer steep, sloped down in a green hill-side to the shore. A little way up the smooth slope was the Grange of Hjoring, from which the Voe took its name. There Earl Hacon had taken up his abode a night or two before the battle, and there we now find him, not as described by the luckless Wolf with a ship or two, but with over three hundred, and surrounded by all the great chiefs that Norway could show; for the news that the Vikings were off the land had spread far and wide, and the warriors of Norway flocked to the banners of the man who, whatever might be his faults, was justly looked on as the national champion.

Though the broad bay of Hjoring was wide enough to contain both hosts, and every warrior, as Hacon himself said, would have ample elbow room; the Grange itself was small, and so as the weather was fine and bright the Earl took his morning meal on tables and benches hastily

made and arranged out of doors on the green turf. As he sat in a rude high-seat with his son Eric on his right hand and Sigmund the Peerless on the other, while Sweyn, his second son, sat opposite to him, the Earl glanced down both sides of the long table and saw with pride that every place was filled with a great chief. It would be long to tell all their names—but there were Skofti and his brother Rognvald of Ærwick, close to Stad; Skeggi, from Uphow, on the Isle of Yrje, commonly called Iron-Skeggi, for his stubborness and sturdiness; there too was Styrkar from Gimse, who, with Skeggi, were the two greatest chiefs in Norway north of Stad, the great headland, which jutting out cuts Norway into two divisions, North and South, just as we talk of Great Britain north and south of the Tweed. There, too, on the other side of Eric were his brothers in arms—Thorir the Hart, from the Voe, in Helgeland, away north, and the red and bitter Viking whom he had just reclaimed and reconciled to Earl Hacon's cause, Thorstein Longwaist. On the other side of Sweyn were his brothers Erlend and Sigurd, not old enough to bear

the title of Earl like Eric and himself, but strong enough to take their share in the defence of the land. They sat one on each side of Earl Sweyn, and on either side of them were two liegemen of the Earl from Naumdale, the old Eyvind Finn's son, and Erlend Steak. These were mostly from the districts north of Stad; but champions from the south and east country were not wanting at that meal, the chief of whom were Gissur the White, from Valdres, and our old friend and Vagn's bitter enemy Thorkell of Leira, from the Bay.

Besides these were several Icelanders, of whom the Earl was very fond, because of their bravery and cleverness, and still more perhaps, because they had up to that time resisted all the approaches of Christianity and clung closely to the ancient faith. Of all foreigners, Sigmund the Peerless, of Faroe, stood first, neither an Icelander nor a Norwegian, but gifted with the good qualities of both. Next in favour stood Einar the Skald, whose father was Helge, of Bearhaven in Broadforth in the west of Iceland, and whose mother was Nidbeorga, daughter of a Scottish King, who had been carried off by

her husband in a cruize in western waters, but she too had Norse blood in her veins, for her mother was Kathleen, a daughter of Rolf the Ganger, begotten in Iceland before he left off sea-roving and settled down in France to found the Dukedom and dynasty of Normandy. There too from Iceland were Vigfus, the son of Glum, of the Islefirth in the north, called Viga-Glum, from much man-slaying; and two more, Thord, from Alvidra, and his brother Thorleif Scum.

As the meal went on, the Earl's face, which had at first been gloomy and lowering, brightened; and he nodded to those at a distance and spoke graciously and kindly to those near him. To Skofti he said out loud, so that all might hear,—

"This is as it should be, Skofti; I am glad to see thee close to Eric, shoulder to shoulder. This if ever is a time to forget old feuds."

Skofti bowed low, and for a moment said nothing, for it still rankled in his heart that Eric when but a boy of twelve years old, with his foster-father Thorleif, had fallen on Skofti,

his father, called Tidings-Skofti, and slain him on a point of honour.

"Nay, man," said the Earl, "never brood over the past, but let bygones be bygones. Yours, indeed, was the blood-feud after your father: but I made Eric, whom I love as my life, an outlaw for the deed, and paid my atonement to thee, such as no Earl in Norway, much less a liegeman, has ever had. It is known to all men how I loved your father; yes," he went on with a sigh, "more dearly than a brother; and had I taken Eric red-handed I would have slain him on the spot. But now we are all good friends, and besides it was years ago."

"Blood is stronger than water," said Skofti gloomily, "and more lasting than any paint: you may cover it with gold, and so keep it out of sight; but there sticks the stain under the price of a man however high you may heap the gold."

"We will speak no more about it, Skofti," said the Earl. "Forget Eric and your feud, but do not forget Norway;" and then raising his voice, he said in a tone at once deep and clear—

"Know every man that is here come to do us good service, that if I or my liegemen have anything outstanding against him, whether it be for skatt, or toll, or tax, or matter of blood, or of violence and unruliness of any kind, he is hereby clean forgiven as though he had never offended, for my sake and for the sake of this land of Norway which we are all bound to hold against these Vikings."

A roar of applause rang through the air and spread from table to table and group to group; for while the chiefs ate and drank we may be sure their men who thronged the shore were not idle in their appetites.

It had scarce died away, when a tall gaunt man rose up from his place at the Earl's table, and stood before him and said,—

"Hail, lord! when will it please you to hear my 'Lack of Gold?'"

"'Lack of Gold,' Einar of the Shield-maidens! With you it is ever 'lack of gold;' but as for this song of thine which you call thus, and wish me to hear, know there is a time for all things, and this is not the time to hear songs."

"What better time could a skald find to

sing your praises and great deeds, lord, than this—when so many brave men are gathered together?"

"I tell thee, Einar," said the Earl, "this is the time to fight and not to sing. Thou canst both sing and fight; for no man in the North ever stood more stoutly up to his foeman than thou. Come to me at this time to-morrow, after the fight; but fight now, and let your song rest."

The stalwart Icelander smiled and said,—

"Once when I was with our friend Egil, son of Baldgrim, away at Burg, in the Moorlands in Iceland, I asked him to tell me when he had ever been in greatest peril, and he sang—

"Once alone with eight I fought,
Twice eleven Egil sought,
Single-hand, I slew them all,
Then the wolves kept carnival;
Fiercely then we hacked and hewed,
Shattered shields the war-field strewed;
Till before my sword and spear
None withstood me far or near."

"Sang he that, Einar?" said the Earl. "Well, it was a short song and a merry one, all about himself. I wish we had him here

this day to slay to his own hand a dozen or so of these Vikings."

"Hear my song, lord," again asked the Icelander.

"Be content, Einar," said the Earl. "with singing one song, and that not thine own."

"You will not hear it then, lord," said the obstinate Einar; "then I will seek some one else;" and with these words he turned and ran down to the beach, singing as he went,—

"On this Earl I made a song,
To hear it now he deems it long,
Is he better than the kings
Who erst repaid my praise with rings?
He may find the skald can fight
Whose verses now he treats with slight."

"What is that he says?" cried the Earl. "Whatever comes of it we must not lose our skald, or how shall our deeds this day be sung?"

The Earl then rose and followed Einar to the shore, where he saw that he went on board the Earl's ship; but no sooner had he got on board her and knew that the Earl was watching him than he rushed down the gangway as though he were in a great hurry, but for all

that he only pranced without making any way; and in fact it was plain all he wished was to see how the Earl took it. There on the gangway he stood and sang another stave :—

> " Seek we yon Earl whose bloody sword,
> Heaps for the wolves their dainty board;
> Sigvald, I mean, whose stalwart arm
> Deals to his foemen hurt and harm:
> He will not slight me when I pray,
> A hearing for a poet's lay."

Then he burst out in prose, " Why not one Earl as well as another? Sigvald is all the same to me as Hacon. He cannot do me less honour than this Barn Earl."

There were times in Earl Hacon's life when words such as these would have cost Einar his life; but whether it were that he loved the man and was loath to lose him, or whether he thought it good policy to keep so strong an arm on his side and to put Einar in a good temper, certain it is that the stern Barn Earl only laughed when he heard Einar's staves, and then called out, and bade him come and speak with him.

As soon as Einar obeyed the call, the Earl said—

"That is all brag to talk of running off to the Vikings. Besides, how do you know where they be? and, another thing, do you think we would let you go just at this very pinch to tell all our plans? Far better stay here and fight it out with us. Then, may be, whoever wins the day, if you come out of the battle alive, you may find things to add to your 'Lack of Gold,' which may increase our glory and also your fame as a skald; for you know even the best skalds must have mighty deeds to sing of."

Then, seeing that the stubborn Icelander was still in the sulks, he said—

"Stay, and I will give thee a reward which could not be better if I had heard your 'Lack of Gold,' and rewarded you generously for it. I tell you I must have you on my side this day to sing the glories of this great battle, which shall be had in mind so long as Norway is the abode of men."

As he said this, he put his hand on the Icelander's shoulder, and drew him up to the Grange. Then, passing in-doors for a minute or two, he came back, bearing in his hand a pair of scales and two weights.

Now weights and scales now-a-days may remind the reader merely of cheesemongers or apothecaries, and one thinks involuntarily of hideous copper scales, with brass weights even more ugly still; but there are scales and scales, and in early times weights and scales might be very artistic things—things of price, as the term was. Of this kind were Earl Hacon's scales and weights. The scales were of the finest silver, purified in the fire, and richly gilt. The weights were one of gold and the other of silver, and each was wrought with the likeness or an image of a man. They were also used as lots, as it was a common practice amongst the Northmen to cast lots to decide future events. These were the Earl's own weights and scales, and he used them on all great occasions.

"See, Einar," said the Earl, "these I will give you to make our friendship fast and firm. Do you know how to use them?"

"I know where my lot is cast," said Einar, still sulkily, "but how to cast it I know not. Fate rules in this as in all else."

"See, I will show thee," said the Earl,

solemnly. "By these scales and lots I can inquire of the future, and they always answer right. What shall I ask?"

"Ask if you will win the day: that is what we all wish to know."

"So be it," said the Earl. "Now, mark what I say and do. You see this little image on the golden lot, and that silver one on the other? If, when I throw them into the scale, that golden one turns face up, and the silver not, we shall win the day; but we shall not win it if the silver image turns up; and so let the gods decide."

As he said this, he threw the lots each into its scale; and there was a great clang, and the lots rolled over and over several times. At last they lay quiet, and lo! the golden lot lay with its image uppermost, while the silver lot lay with its back turned up.

Einar was just about to utter an exclamation, when the Earl stopped him.

"Wait a while, Einar!" he cried, "there is something still to come. See, the lots lie still, and I hold the scales still; but yet the scales are about to speak after their fashion."

As they watched, Einar saw that the lot began to stir, though the Earl held the scale with an arm as firm and free from trembling as a rock. At last it rolled over and over again, and the scale gave a clang, which was plainly heard.

"Mark that, Einar," said the Earl. "That is the token that the gods give by the scale, that what is asked has been truly answered. So it has ever been with me, and so it will be with you if you keep your faith in the gods pure and free from taint. And be sure of one thing, we shall win the day, whatever sacrifices we may have to make. And now take these precious things on board to your berth on my ship, and let my thrall, Kark, sound the horn to muster the force. By this time all our men must have well eaten and drunk."

CHAPTER III.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE FIGHT.

THE sound of Norwegian horns over the water was answered by that of the Vikings, who, after a hearty meal, were now ready for action.

As soon as Vagn's attempt to seize Earl Hacon had failed, it was clear the quarrel must be fought out in a fair upstanding fight. The number of men on each side was unequal, the Norwegians outnumbering their assailants, who were hard upon ten thousand strong. But, as we have already said, though the Viking ships were only half as many as the three hundred which flocked to Hacon's banner, they, ship for ship, were far superior to the majority of the Norwegian fleet, which, though it contained many long-ships or vessels of war, was largely recruited with trading ships and galleys, which were quite unequal to cope with the warsnakes

of the Vikings, which were soon to bear down on them.

While the mass of his men were at breakfast, Earl Hacon had sent out spies, some in light craft, and others by land, to climb the rocks on each side of the bend of the Voe, who were to bring him word as to the number, size, and trim of the hostile fleet. These particulars obtained, he proceeded to marshal his force, which was already arrayed in three divisions, forming a semicircle across the bay very much in the shape in which a seine is shot. Inside this semicircle lay the Earl's ship, and some others containing the leaders whom he had resolved to place at the head of each division. For himself he resolved to head none of these divisions, but to remain with his ship free to hasten to render help in the action wherever it might be most needed.

In the middle of his force, or the centre division, against which the captain of the Vikings might be expected to come, he placed his eldest son Sweyn, with two other ships, to bear the brunt of the Vikings. If Sigvald came in the middle, his brother, Thorkell the Tall, the most

renowned champion of the Vikings, might be looked for in his company; and against him, Iron-Skeggi, Sigurd Steak, and Thorir Hart, each in his ship, were told off. These were great odds, even against Thorkell the Tall; for the ships of the liegemen we have named were quite equal to any warships of the Vikings. Nor when Earl Sigvald came in the centre, as was expected, was he to be met by Earl Sweyn alone, for he was to be backed by two of the Earl's oldest friends and bravest chiefs—one, our old friend Gudbrand of the Dales, and Styrkar of Gimse.

So far the marshalling had proceeded, when the Earl called out:

"Three we have set with thee, Sweyn, against Sigvald, this upstart Earl. Next in command will come Bui, Veseti's son, the bravest and most stubborn Viking of the whole fleet. Now, old enemy and new friend, Thorkell Longwaist, is the time to show your mettle. We marshal you against Bui, and with you shall stand Hallstein, Carline's bane. This will be no Carline's play, Hallstein; you will have to fight men, and not old women, to-day;

and as Bui is so strong, the third against him shall be you, Thorkell Leira, and so may you all win, and share between you his chests of gold."

"With Bui," said Sigmund, who stood at the Earl's right hand, "will come Sigurd the Champion, as they call him."

"Two of our men will be a match for him," said the Earl, "and those two shall be you two, father and son, Armod from Onundfirth, and Arni."

"You have left one of the worst last, lord," said Sigmund. "In all that fleet which lies watching us in the sound yonder there is no warrior so bold or so lucky as Vagn, Aki's son."

"I had not forgotten him," said the Earl. "As he is so fond of your daughter, Thorkell, and has already paid you a visit, you might meet him if your hands were not so full with Bui; and so I shall leave Eric, my son here, to cope with Vagn, and with him shall go Erling of Skuggi. Those ought to be enough; but as these Vikings are mostly to be met by threes, we will add to them Ogmund the White. His stump is scarcely healed, but he has something to repay Vagn

for that blow in the Bay; and if Eric and Erling and he have good luck, they may win back for Ogmund, our liegeman, his good gold ring."

"There is but one daring chief left to meet," said Sigmund. "With Vagn will come the oldest but not the weakest Viking: his foster-father, Beorn the Welshman. It will take three men to pull him down."

"And here they stand," said Hacon, turning to a group of three who stood not far off. "The first shall be Einar the Little, short in stature, but strong as a bear. Let him meet this Welsh bear. With him shall be Havard Wide-awake, and Halvard of Flydruness. And now I think all our foes are cared for. Now go on board, good men and true, and lash your ships together as soon as ye see the Vikings coming round yonder point. As for me, my ship shall swim loose in the horse-shoe behind you, ready to bear help to whatever part of our line is most pressed. But stay, I miss three men. Have we not our Icelanders here? Einar is safe on board my ship, and we are fast friends with our skald; but where is Vigfus, the son of Viga Glum? where Thord of Alvidra

and Thorleif Scum?—all stout fellows, where are they?"

"I can answer for them, father," said Eric. "Early this morning they came to me and begged, as they had no ships of their own, that I would let them fight on board mine, and I said yes, and then they all went off into the wood to get Thorleif a club."

"He is a big fellow, that Thorleif," said the Earl, "and I am well pleased that these Icelanders should go with thee, Eric. If Vigfus fights as well as his father, Glum, when he slew the Baresark here in Norway, years ago, few Vikings will stand before him. And now I say again, every man to his ship; and by the help of the gods we will win the day for Norway."

With shouts and cheers, the Earl and his sons and chiefs and their men made for the shore.

"Those Icelanders will be too late with their club," said Eric to Erling of Skuggi. "Battles, like time and tide, tarry for no man. The Vikings will soon be coming in upon us. It is already half flood."

Erling turned to the woodside, which hemmed in the slope, and said:

"Yonder they come through the pine forest, and see what a club Thorleif bears in his right hand!"

"I see him well," said Eric; and then he hailed the Icelander, who, instead of coming straight to him, made for the fires where the men had cooked their morning meal, and which lay smouldering in their embers. There Thorleif stuck his club, and turned and twisted it about till its outside was all scorched and charred; then he tossed it like a feather on to his shoulder, and ran down with the rest after Eric. As they overtook him, the young Earl said:

"Thou wert all but late, Thorleif. But what wilt thou do with that huge club?"

In answer, Thorleif broke out into verse, and trolled this stave:

"I hold in my hand
A hammer for heads,
Bui's bone-breaker
Baleful for men.
Of this warder of Hacon,
Let Sigvald beware;

For this oaken stump,
If I stand through the day,
Shall belabour the Vikings,
And bring them bad luck."

"Well sung, well sung, Thorleif," said Eric, with a loud laugh. Einar of the Shield-maidens, or, as my father has now nicknamed him, Einar Scaleclang, could not have trolled a better stave. But now all of you into the boat, and away to my ship. Ere we land again, many a gallant fellow will lie in the cold in the bosom of Ran."

While the Earl and his men were thus preparing for the struggle, Sigvald and the Vikings were not idle. After they had eaten and drunk well—for many their last meal on earth—Sigvald held counsel with his captains on board his ship. This was not a time that Sigvald could forbear to use his glib tongue, and he addressed the leaders on the poop.

"Here we are, gallant comrades," he said, "on what I hope is our day of victory. Before night falls, at least, we shall have had an opportunity of fulfilling our vows, and may we all fulfill them well. I know, indeed, that this is the hour for deeds rather than words, but so

much I could not help saying; and, with so many brave men before me, who can doubt of victory? The next thing to settle, is how we shall attack them, and in what order; and here we are in doubt, for none of us have so much as peeped into the bight of the Voe yonder, except Vagn and Beorn. How say you, Beorn the Welshman, you who have seen so many fights, of what shape and fashion is the Voe round the elbow yonder?"

"It widens out after the bend," said the old Viking, "into a long bight, which gets broader as it runs into the main, and ends in a horse-shoe bay; but some way from the shore —a bowshot, maybe—there are two small scars or islets, which break the open water and divide it into three parts. Behind these lay the Earl's ships, about two to one of ours, but smaller. That was all I saw, and Vagn saw it too."

"It is just as Beorn says," said Vagn.

"Well, then," said Sigvald, "our course is plain. We must row into the Voe round the elbow with the flood, which is now making strong; and as soon as we reach those scars we

must lash our ships together in three divisions, and so drift in upon them with the tide, and fall upon them, and clear their decks, and take their ships as fast as ever we can. How say you, Beorn, again—is this good counsel?"

"It could not be better," said Beorn.

Then Sigvald went on:

"We have now got three divisions, and the next thing to settle is who shall command them. The middle between the two scars is the place of honour, and where it is likely the brunt of the battle will fall. That, as Captain, I claim for myself, and there I will command and set up my banner; and next to me shall be the ship of my brother, Thorkell. The left division you shall command, Bui the Stout, and with you shall stand Sigurd the Champion; while on the right I shall place you, Vagn, Aki's son, and you, Beorn the Welshman. So that we have a centre and two wings and two captains to each. Has anyone anything to say against this order of battle?"

Not a word was spoken at this challenge, but there was as usual a murmur of applause

at the Earl's readiness and skill in marshalling his force.

"So that, too, is settled," Sigvald went on; "and now let us get out our oars and be at them as soon as ever we can."

Then a minute or two passed, while the ships of the Vikings lay still idle on the water, slowly drifting with the tide up the mouth of the Voe. Then came the dash of oars, and the roar of waves, as the whole fleet began to walk the waters. We have seen that the Vikings were skilful sailors, and their skill availed them on this occasion. It was not every captain who could lead one hundred and fifty long-ships through the mouth of the Voe; but Sigvald was equal to the emergency. As he led the van, his horns sounded, and the fleet, as if by magic, parted into three divisions, while the centre and rear backed, the van under Sigvald held on, and, in less time than it takes to tell, what had been one long line, was seen to take the shape of three squadrons of fifty each, under the command of Sigvald, Bui, and Vagn. Even then there was barely room to clear the rocks on either side;

but, though little, it was enough. Without fouling or grounding, the three divisions passed the strait at the bend, after which point, as we know, the Voe gradually opened out. In this order they rowed till they reached the spot up to which Vagn and Beorn had already penetrated that morning. There the whole fleet saw what the two adventurers had already beheld,—the horse-shoe bay, fringed by a long curved line of ships, and before them the two scars or islets, which cut the open waters into three broad channels.

It was a glorious sight on that fresh winter's morning,—that broad bay, crowded with ships with Sweyn's banner on the right, and Eric's on the left; while in the centre, but free, and not lashed together like the rest, floated one long-ship, on which fluttered the well-known Raven Standard of Earl Hacon himself.

The two hosts were not now a mile apart, and the Vikings could hear the voices of men mingled in one common murmur, above which rose every now and then shouts of challenge and derision from the sturdy crews of the Northmen.

The ship of Thorkell the Tall lay side by side with that of his brother, who called out to him from the poop of the "Bison"—

"A gallant sight, brother! Here, at least, we shall find foemen worthy of our steel!"

"A gallant sight, indeed, brother!" roared back the gigantic Viking. "May we all fulfil our vows, and lay yonder proud banners on our decks ere evening fall!"

But that was not the moment for words. Words of wonder, surprise, and joy, no doubt burst out on both sides, but that was all that time allowed. Again Sigvald's horns sounded the signal to form one line, and as the line had been a little time before suddenly severed into three squadrons, so now these squadrons took the shape of a long line. But it was not a long line like that of the Norwegians, whose force, with few exceptions, were all lashed together broadside to broadside, with the stems turned towards the enemy. As the two scars cut the Voe into three broad channels before the horse-shoe bay could be reached, so Sigvald's line was formed of three separate squadrons of fifty ships, which were lashed together. By

the time that this had been done, the whole line had neared the scars. Again the horns sounded the charge, and then, as though guided by the strength of a single man, the three squadrons dashed forward, the two scars parting the centre under Sigvald from Bui on his left and Vagn on his right. Again the rocky islets were cleared without loss of ship or man. The three squadrons again formed in line, and rushed as one ship across the open water between them and the Norwegian line. Arrows flew, and spears and stones hurtled in the air, and the Battle of Hjoringvoe, on the issue of which that fair realm of Norway lay at stake, was actually begun.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BATTLE BEGINS.

WHILE the stones rattled on their decks, and the spears and arrows whirred in the air, the Vikings rowed steadily up to their antagonists, and charged them stem on, borne along both by their oars and the tide. We have already described the order of an ancient sea-fight in the North, and the beginning of the Battle of Hjoringvoe was like all such actions. The object of the assailants was to break the enemy's line, and either to sever the lashings which bound ship to ship, or to make the enemy cut them and fly. If this were done, the battle degenerated into a series of actions between ship and ship, in which the side whose lashings were first broken was generally worsted, for it was not easy to sever the lashings until the decks of that ship had been cleared of men.

The first shock of the Viking squadrons as they closed with their foemen was terrible; but the hearts of the Norwegians were stout, and so were their ships; and though some of them were shattered from stem to stern by the high prows of the Vikings, we do not read that any were sunk at once, or that their decks were soon cleared. Locked together by their prows, the rival hosts lay for a while under a great cloud of arrows and shafts, which were launched on either side with fearful precision when the combatants were so close together. But though the Vikings had, perhaps, the best of it in this stage of the encounter, the Norwegian crews were so brave, and, besides, so outnumbered their enemies, that for a while the battle was one of spears, and arrows, and stones, and from the Viking vessels, tall as they were, no man had yet dared to board a Norwegian ship, and clear its decks by sword-stroke or spear-thrust.

So the battle raged, and all the while the winter sun shone bright, and the smoke which now obscures our actions by sea or land being wanting, no doubt it was a gallant sight to see

twenty thousand men in four hundred and fifty ships fighting to win Norway in that beautiful horseshoe bay.

We have seen that Earl Sweyn was posted in the centre against Earl Sigvald, his ship being lashed just in the very middle with the rest. Behind him, in his ship, floating free, was Earl Hacon himself, ready to render help, and to turn the battle or restore it at any point of the line where his presence might be needed.

As the first onset was made the Earl stood with his eldest son Sweyn on the young Earl's ship, which stood the charge of the "Bison" bravely.

"That was a stout knock, Sweyn," said the Earl. "Mark how she shivers in all her timbers, but for all that she still floats as tight as ever; it was no mean shipwright who put her together.

"Aye, aye, father!" said Sweyn. "She is tight enough, never fear; she will float as long as Norway rises out of the main." And then as a huge stone rattled on his steel cap, he went on—

"That made my brain-pan rattle. These Vikings do not make war with sugar-plums."

Just then a spear hurled from Sigvald's ship scarce missed the Earl's middle, and burying its point deep in the deck, stood quivering between the father and son.

"That was well thrown, Sweyn," said the Earl. "That fellow meant my death; but a miss is as good as a mile, and he whom the ancient gods shield, needs not to fear all the marksmen in the world."

"Had that hit you, father," said Sweyn, "it might have fared ill with you in spite of your long shirt of mail."

"I fear no shafts or spears with or without my shirt of mail," said Hacon, proudly. "In this, as in all things, Fate, to which even Odin must yield, rules the day; and not this or that battle or risk of life which a man may be in."

Then, as he glanced along the line with his eagle eye, he said—

"All goes well here in the centre. Earl Sigvald, this new-made upstart, must fight better and be bolder if he means to win the day. Here we hold our own, and his ship is as far

from boarding us as ever. Your men fight stoutly, Sweyn; and see, the decks of the enemy's ships are strewn with men who need burial, but not the leech. Yes!" he added, "here in the centre it is not likely that Sigvald will fulfil his insolent vow. Here the Barn Earl will beat the Robber Earl, never fear. Away yonder in the left wing, Eric and his men bear up bravely against Vagn, the son of Aki, and his foster-father. There too, our line keeps its curve, and is not indented or bowed in; but away on our right things are not going so well. There Bui, Veseti's son, has made such a furious onslaught, that our line is already bent and bowed, if it be not already broken."

"What is to be done, father?" said Sweyn; "here, as you say, we hold our own."

"What is to be done?" said Hacon; "why to bear help where it is needed. Take my ship which floats there behind us, and go to Eric, and tell him if he thinks his men can hold their own awhile, while he is absent, to get on board his 'Ironsides,' which floats free like my ship, and then both of you bear down on Bui, and

restore our line. They must never, and least of all such a captain as Bui, break our line and get between us and the land."

Then as Sweyn turned on the gory deck to obey, Earl Hacon added, "Stay, Sweyn, though you take my ship, leave me my banner. If that were to retire it might be said that Earl Hacon was flying from the fight, and the enemy would take heart; but that is what Earl Hacon will never do, to fly from his enemy."

In a minute Sweyn was on board his father's ship, and was soon behind his brother's squadron.

There stood the gallant Eric on his second ship, surrounded by his liegemen and by the knot of Icelanders who loved him best of all that family.

"How fares it, brother?" said Sweyn, as he hailed Eric.

"Well, brother," said Eric, as he hurled a spear into Vagn's ship, of which the Saga says, "the man who stood before that spear did not need to meet another." "Well, and how fares it with our father?"

"Well, too," said Sweyn. "We hold our own against Sigvald, and though we have lost many men, they too have lost many; and we are better able to bear the loss, for we can smell the pancakes which our wives are making, while for them it is a far cry to Jomsburg."

"Then the battle goes for us, brother, and we need never fear," said Eric, as he hurled a mighty stone after the fashion of Homer's heroes into the Vikings on Beorn's ship.

"Not so, brother," said Sweyn, "and this is why I am here."

"I thought you must have come on some business, brother," said Eric, "what is it? Out with it; time is scarce, and every word I utter spares a foeman's life."

"Our father asks, if you are not too hard pressed, whether you will not get on board your 'Ironsides,' and come with me to the right wing, where Bui is bearing down all before him, and restore the fight."

"Why waste so many words, brother?" said Eric. "Of course I will come, and take my Icelanders with me. The rest I will leave here. It will not take long to set our line straight,

and I will be back before Vagn can do us any great harm. One spear more, and I am ready."

As he said this, the young Earl launched a spear, with unerring aim, at Vagn's bowman, who fell back dead.

Pausing for a moment to see the effect of his aim, Eric said, "That fellow will never fulfil any vow that he made before he came hither, unless it were to meet his death in Norway."

Then he turned with his brother, got on board his tall "Ironsides," the best ship in all the host, and the two brothers were soon racing against each other for the right wing.

They arrived at the very nick of time, for Bui had well maintained his reputation of being the most terrible of all the Viking captains. Against him were marshalled it is true none of the royal race, and no raven banner floated over the Norwegian ships opposed to him; but still there was Thorkell Longwaist, a Viking, lately as much an object of awe to the Norwegians as Bui himself; nor was Hallstein Carlinebane an antagonist to be despised, in spite of his absurd nickname; while in Thorkell of

Leira, who ought by rights to have been marshalled against Vagn, he had to cope with one of the trustiest liegemen and bravest champions that Earl Hacon could reckon among his men. Still, while the Vikings were all picked men, Bui's crew was formed out of the very flower of the champions of the North. It was said of him that, brave as Vagn and Beorn and Sigurd and many others of the band were, there was one captain in the company braver than all these, and that was Bui. He was entirely single-minded in his purpose, and—while Sigvald was politic and married, Vagn in love with Ingibeorg, and Beorn a hater of women, besides being a veteran—Bui was a Viking and nothing more. The dust of battle was as the breath of his nostrils; and while others might delight in verse, or love, or spoil, Bui cared for battle and battle alone, and if he could not fight he cared not to live. Such a captain, so addicted to arms, was sure to have worthy followers; and, besides, his wealth and those two chests of red gold which he always carried about with him, were magnets which drew to him the choicest of the warriors of the North.

As soon therefore as Bui went into action with his squadron, on the left wing of the Vikings, he discharged such a continued fire of stones, arrows, and spears on the ship opposed to his own, which happened to be that of Hallstein of the unhappy nickname, that scarcely a man could reply to it. A few stones and shafts were launched in return, but the Norwegians for the most part betook themselves to the bulwarks for shelter, and they were so smitten behind their shields, that they fell like sheep before Bui's missiles.

It was in vain that the two Thorkells, Thorkell Longwaist on one side, and Thorkell of Leira on the other, tried to succour Hallstein and to keep their line together with his ship; theirs too were driven back by Bui, and instead of a curve outwards, the Norwegian right wing soon presented a curve inwards. From these three ships something very like a panic spread to the Norwegian vessels near them, while all Bui's squadron became bolder in their attack when they saw that their captain had made so good a beginning. The Norwegians now began to fall fast on all that wing, and their whole

line began to waver and sway backward. Now was the moment that Bui meant to board; and, cutting the lashings of Hallstein's ship, break that wing in half; when he would be free either to sink ship after ship, or to keep his ships all together, and in a body take Earl Hacon in the centre in the rear, thus placing him between as it were two fires.

But this lucky moment for the Vikings under Bui never came. The watchful eye of Earl Hacon had detected the weak point in his line, and his two sons in their two tall ships came up just at the very nick of time to restore the fight. Running close up in the rear of the three centre ships of the wing, the great weight of the "Ironsides" and her comrade brought a welcome support to their countrymen, and from their poops, like tall castles, Eric and Sweyn discharged such a shower of missiles against Bui and his men, that they in their turn had to think of shelter, and to abandon, for the present at least, all intention of boarding. Slowly but surely the wavering Norwegian ships closed up in line, and again presented an outward curve to their foe.

This service performed, Eric instinctively turned his eyes to his own squadron which he had quitted, and saw, with something like dismay, that Vagn and his Vikings were almost in the act of effecting, on the left, the manœuvre in which Bui had just been foiled on the right.

Hailing Sweyn from the poop of the "Ironsides," Eric called out, "We two have set the line straight on this wing, brother, but it is now nearly as bad on the left. I must hasten there then, but I can do it alone; meanwhile do you stay here and watch Bui, and cheer up our men."

"Aye, aye, brother!" said Sweyn, and the "Ironsides" with the gallant Eric was soon cutting the water on her way back to the left wing.

The young Earl had a light heart, and never let anything wax in his eyes, as the proverb said; in other words, he always made the best of everything. But his heart must have been light indeed if he failed to discern the peril which was now coming on the Norwegian left from Vagn and his foster-father. They too had seen that Bui was pressing the foe hard on the Norwegian right; had seen Sweyn dash

up to Earl Hacon's ship, and carry off his brother in the huge "Ironsides," to restore the fortunes of the day.

As they went Vagn hailed his old foster-father, and said,—

"Yonder go the old bear's cubs, foster-father, to help him on the right, while that bear, whom we hoped to trap this morning, fights on against Sigvald in the centre. Now is the time for us to follow Bui's example. It will never do to let him be the first to break the Norwegian line."

"Of course not, boy," said Beorn. "Now you talk sense and not nonsense. Let us up and at them and board them, and leave off all this child's play of spears and stones and arrows. Let us take to hand-strokes and sword-strokes, and board them and break their line."

"With all my heart," said Vagn; "you board from your ship, and I will board from mine."

Gathering their best men together in the waist of either ship, Vagn and Beorn rushed foreward sword in hand and shield on arm, and

at the same moment leaped from the prows of their ships on to the forecastle of the Norwegians'. It was so bold a manœuvre—for the Norwegian ships were still full manned, and no one dreamt that the Vikings would venture to board till more men had fallen—that the Norwegians were taken unawares. Though their forecastles were filled with their bravest men, they made little or no stand before the impetuous attack of Vagn and his foster-father. Some of the bravest fell before the sword of the Vikings, the rest lost heart and fled from the forecastle down into the waist of the two ships, where, as in a trap, they were fully exposed to the spears of the boarders, who shot them down till the gangways of both ships were cleared and all that were left to continue the conflict on board each had climbed up into the poop to take refuge.

Instead of waiting to pursue and destroy them, Vagn preferred to break the line at once and not to clear these ships utterly. He called out to Beorn, therefore, to cut the lashings which bound the ship which he had

boarded to the rest, while he did the same on his. This done, Vagn pressed on into the open space beyond in the captured ships, and the first great success of the day had been won for the Vikings by Vagn and Beorn. The Norwegian line on the left was broken; and though Eric might repair the loss, no one could say that it had not been broken.

CHAPTER V.

THE VIKINGS HAVE THE BEST OF IT.

Besides breaking the line of the Norwegians Beorn and Vagn were in the act of loosing the lashings of their own ships that they might take them through the gap in the line, when Eric came up in his "Ironsides." Vagn's ship was already free, but she had not time to pass through the line, when Vagn found that his passage was blocked by the huge ship of the young Earl. Still he held on and tried to force his way, but the prow of the Norwegian met him and both ships dashed against each other.

Both vessels recoiled at the shock, and then lay with their stems overlapping one another on either side. Though Vagn's ship was tall, the huge "Ironsides" was higher still; but not so high that a bold boarder might not leap from the lower to the higher ship. Already,

while the timbers of each still shivered, Vagn stood foremost on his forecastle, and before Eric's men were aware of his purpose he had leapt into their forecastle, followed by Aslak the Baldpate from Bornholm, as he was called, whom Bui had given to Vagn, just as Tofa Sigurd's wife had given the man to him. No sooner had they set their feet firm on the enemy's ship than they threw themselves upon Eric's forecastle men—his picked A. B.'s as we should now call them—and drove them before them with sturdy strokes. Then, turning each to his side, one to starboard and the other to larboard, they began to clear the gangways which ran round the ship of Eric's men. So fierce was their onslaught, and so well backed were they by their own men, who now swarmed into the forecastle behind them, that none could stand before them and they were in a fair way to clear the "Ironsides" and capture her.

All this time Eric was on the poop, but when he saw this bold attack, and beheld his men falling like sheep on either board he rushed down into the waist, followed by his

Icelanders—the foremost of whom was Vigfus, Viga-Glum's son. As they leapt up from the waist on the gangways Eric said,—

"Now, Vigfus, show thyself worthy of thy race and of thy name. Thou comest of a fighting stock and by name thou shouldst be eager for battle. Jump up to larboard while I take the starboard side, and let us check these madmen who are clearing our gangways."

Vigfus smiled grimly but said nothing. In a moment he was up on the larboard gangway, exchanging strokes with the Baldpate of Bornholm.

The day, for a winter day, was warm and bright, and in the heat of battle men grew so hot that they threw away all winter clothing and fought only in their shirts and defensive armour, when any had such gear. Vagn and Beorn, and some others on their side, had steel caps and shirts of mail, or "byrnies," and Eric and Vigfus and others had them on his; but most forward of all in that tussle was the Baldpate of Bornholm, who wore neither steel hat nor woollen cap all through

that day, but butted as it were though the battle with his bald skull.

"Well done," cried Eric from the starboard gangway, as he saw Vigfus smite the Baldpate over the forehead with his sword. "Before that stroke even an ox would go down."

But, to his amazement, the stalwart blow seemed to glide off that shining pate as though it were dealt on glass; and the Baldpate still went butting along the gangway, while Vigfus slipped off it and fell down into the waist among the thwarts.

Thinking that the Baldpate was the more formidable foeman of the two, Eric sprang down into the waist, up on to the larboard gangway, and dealt Aslak a blow with an axe full on his forehead. Never yet had man stood before a blow delivered by the young Earl with all his might, and he looked to see the axe sunk into the skull up to the head; but he looked in vain—the axe seemed to turn in his hand, and to glide off the shining skull, just as the sword of Vigfus after his stroke.

In wonder the young Earl called out to his men,—

"This is no man, but some Troll of accursed race whose head is solid rock, with no hollow in it for brains."

As he said this he avoided a blow which Aslak aimed at him, and, leaping into the waist, again attacked him thence with a knot ot men, but all to little purpose.

"What can he be?" was now the cry. "He is hard—he is fast—no weapon will bite on him; if it were not so he would have had his bald pate cloven to the chine!"

In spite of their exclamations the Baldpate went steadily along the larboard gangway, and not a man dared to stand before him. In this way he had traversed the waist of the ship, and had just reached a little ladder or steps which led up to the poop. All eyes were turned on him, and Eric was in the act of springing up to the poop by the starboard ladder, when Vigfus, who had been lost to sight since he had fallen off the gangway, appeared on the poop ready to bar Aslak's progress up the ladder.

As they gazed they were aware that Vigfus bore in his hand no sword or axe, those idle weapons which had proved so useless against the Baldpate. In both hands he dragged a huge stone anvil, which lay there on the poop that men might mend their swords and axes by its help. Already that morning Vigfus had sought it to weld the pommel of his sword which had got loose, and now he brought it for a better purpose. Instead of a mender of weapons it was to become a weapon itself. Slowly he dragged the great block of stone along, and then when Aslak had his foot on the first step of the ladder, he lifted it up in both hands and hurled it down on that shiny bald pate.

As it fell all thought that it sunk into that shining skull as though it had been butter. The Baldpate of Bornholm staggered and fell down on the gangway he had so bravely cleared stone-dead, and Eric's men leapt up on it from the waist and manned it anew.

"Well done, Vigfus," shouted the Earl; "he had made himself 'fast' against iron, but

not against stone, and by stone he has met his death at thy hand."

While this was passing on the larboard gangway Vagn had not been idle to starboard. Along the gangway he went, dealing terrible strokes right and left, and killing and maiming men at every blow. Eric, as we have seen, had rushed at first to meet him, but was stopped by Aslak's progress on the other gangway, which seemed to need his presence. As he turned thither with Vigfus he bade the other Icelanders to meet Vagn and hold him in check till he could return. Bravely they met him, and bravely he withstood them, ever gaining ground, till he had got past the mast amidships and was well on his way to the poop, though not so far as Aslak, for he was not supposed to have used charms, and made himself "fast," like the Baldpate of Bornholm. Though a fierce foeman he raised no uncanny feeling in the minds of Eric's men, who, as they stood up to him, knew that they were not fighting against black arts, but against flesh and blood, eked out by courage and muscle.

So the struggle lasted till a great shout arose, and as Vagn paused to look whence and why it came, he saw the Baldpate tottering to his fall, and knew that on that gangway his scheme of boarding and clearing the young Earl's ship had failed. As he stood on the gangway he could see that the position of the two ships had changed during the action, and that the force of the flood-tide had brought them very nearly broadside to broadside. Like a good captain, Vagn saw that retreat to his own ship was the best course left to him, and just as he was thinking how it might best be effected, Thorleif Scum, the Icelander, of whom we have already heard, rushed at him along the gangway with his oaken club and dealt him a blow upon his steel cap which split it and made his brains rattle and his body reel as though about to fall.

When Vagn saw the mighty blow coming he thrust forwards with his sword at Thorleif, and as the blow fell he staggered forward with his weight on his sword, and gave the Icelander a scratch, as he thought. Then, recovering himself, he leapt off the gangway on

the waist of the "Ironsides" into the waist of his own ship, and came down standing on his feet, and as he leapt, his men, who had their eyes on their Captain, leapt too, and so the swarm of boarders passed away from Eric's ship, and they parted, with great glory to Vagn, who had broken the Norwegian line and half cleared Eric's ship.

Nor was Eric's glory much less, for he had restored the fight, and foiled Vagn's attempt to capture his ship, though with such great loss of life on both sides that they were glad to rest for a while from the struggle, and remain quiet in their ships and repair their losses.

While this desperate struggle was proceeding on the Norwegian left, it had been not less stoutly maintained along their centre and their right. In the middle, between the scars, Earl Hacon, though deprived of Sweyn's help, who still opposed Bui on the left, had held his own against Sigvald and Thorkell the tall. On no part of the line had it come to boarding, except in the case of Vagn and Eric, but all along it the action had been close and bloody, and some of the smaller Norwegian vessels had

been so shattered by the shock of the tall Viking ships as to be hardly seaworthy, while their decks had been almost cleared of men by the showers of missiles hurled at them from a height above their heads which gave their assailants a great advantage.

Earl Hacon was a skilful commander, and at this period of the fight he saw what an advantage it would be to him who was so superior in men to retire for a while from the fight, and, while both sides rested, to repair his damages and to reman his ships from those fresh recruits to his cause who were standing idle on the shore.

About the time, therefore, that the furious struggle between Vagn and Eric ceased, Earl Hacon had resolved to withdraw his whole line nearer to the shore, and there to await a second attack of the Vikings. When they had rested and refitted, they would row out to meet them again, or if the Vikings rowed in to attack them, they would be in no worse position if they fought close to the land.

While the battle still raged, though perhaps with less fury on each side than before, for

even Vikings and Norwegians were after all flesh and blood, and they had been fighting for more than two hours, the horns on board the Earl's ship sounded a retreat, and then slowly backing and favoured by the flood, which had not yet turned, the huge armament sullenly retired towards the shore of the mainland, and the battle ceased for a while, for Sigvald and his captains were taken unawares, and had to consult before they could make up their minds what was best to be done. And now the horns on Sigvald's ship sounded in their turn, and in a little while the Earl was surrounded by his captains on the poop of the "Bison."

As each mounted the ladder from the waist, Sigvald gave him a kindly greeting.

"Thanks, valiant comrade," he said to Bui. "Thine is the glory of having first so bent and forced the Norwegian line that it was all but broken, and would have been broken had not the two young earls hastened thither."

With a gloomy smile Bui passed on, muttering as he went, "Had I been in the centre perhaps the line might have been long since broken."

Next came Vagn, followed by the faithful Beorn.

"Welcome both," said Sigvald, "and twice welcome Vagn, who, as we saw, broke the line and passed through it, though, truth to say, we scarce know what happened afterwards, our hands were so full here till the Norwegians retreated."

"We pierced the line, Captain, as you saw," said Vagn, "but before I could get quite through Earl Eric threw himself into the gap with his 'Ironsides,' and then I tried to board him and failed, though I half cleared his ship, and would have taken her, I think, had not that Vigfus Viga-Glum's son, as they called him, split open the skull of the Baldpate of Bornholm with a block of stone which they used as an anvil."

"Bad are the Black Arts," said Sigvald; "see what comes of charms and spells. Had the Baldpate trusted in a good steel cap, and not to witches and wizards, he might have been alive now, and the 'Ironsides' ours."

After thus welcoming his captains, Sigvald asked their advice. Bui and Vagn were both

for giving the enemy no rest, for following them up at once without a moment's delay, and for settling the quarrel with the edge of the sword. They have retreated, they said, and that alone is a token that they are weak. Had they felt themselves strong they would have stayed out here and fought it out without flinching.

Sigvald and Thorkell and the veteran Beorn were of another opinion. Men were men all the world over, they said. What was good for the Norwegians was good also for them. They, too, wanted rest and food, and would fight all the better for both. If they had the best of it in the first bout they would have the best of it in the second. Besides, the sun was still high, and there was time enough to rest and win the battle. It was already half won, and before nightfall they would have it wholly in their hands.

So the captains returned, each of them to his ship, and the council ended.

As Bui and Vagn, the two who voted for instant action, went down into the waist of Sigvald's ship, Vagn said to his comrade,—

"What thinkest thou of the day, Bui?"

"I think it both won and lost, Vagn. Won now if we went in at them while they are stiff and sore, and have not patched up and re-manned their ships. Lost, if we do not, and give them time to refit."

"Very much after my mind, Bui, and there is another thing. We fight fair, at least most of us, now that the Baldpate of Bornholm is gone, but who can tell how Earl Hacon works? He is said to be mighty with spells and charms. Who can tell what he may at this very moment be about? One thing, I hope, whatever happens, that we may all of us have heart this day to fulfil our vows."

"I shall fulfil mine whatever happens," said Bui.

"And I mine," said Vagn, "if I only have a chance."

"Never fear, boy," said Beorn, who now came up behind them. "Never fear, you will have your chance. I wouldn't have minded going in at them at once, but the Captain thought otherwise, and obedience is a Viking's first law. As we are to eat and rest, come

along, foster-child, you at least have worked hard to-day, and food and a snooze will do you all the good in the world."

So the Vikings lay off and on, and ate and rested, and the Norwegians clung to the shore, and rested, and refitted and remanned their ships. As for Earl Hacon, his deeds must be related in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GODS CHOOSE THEIR VICTIM.

No sooner had Earl Hacon landed than he summoned his four sons, Sweyn, Eric, Erlend, and Sigurd to him, and spoke as follows to them :—

"Sons," he said, "and you, most of all, Sweyn and Eric, as ye are grown men and brave captains both, I wish to let you know that my eyes are not blind to what has happened to-day. In many sea-fights have I been, and in land fights too. At the Dannework, with old King Gorm against the Emperor Otho; against Harold Grayfell and Gold-Harold, of Denmark, both of whom I fell on and slew in one day; in fleets as commander, and in single ships, single-handed against chiefs and Vikings; but never have I been in a struggle so doubtful as this. There is no gainsaying it that the battle so far has gone against us. It is all very well

to say to the mass of men that we retire for a while to eat and rest and refit, that we may fight better at last. That only proves the strength of the Vikings, for if they had not been so strong the battle would have ended long ago, and we should have needed neither food nor rest till it was over and won. Truth to say, these Vikings are far stronger than I thought, though I did not rate them low. The worst men to withstand that ever I came across, and if we cannot make a better fight of it in the afternoon than before noon, the sun that sets to-night will see the last of me and mine in Norway."

Here he paused, and looked round at his sons, seeming to ask a question by gazing into their faces.

Eric answered, for Sweyn was slow of words, but Eric was glib-tongued like Hacon himself.

"No one can say, father, that we have not all done our best. We have all fought bravely. I speak not of myself; but you and Sweyn, and Erlend, and all of us have fought bravely and so have our men. I call the battle doubtful, but not lost."

Here Sweyn had plucked up heart to say something, for, though a lion in fight he was a lamb in words.

"If they are so strong, father! why do they not come in and attack us at once?"

"That is not wisely spoken, Sweyn," said the Earl. "They do not come in and attack us now, because they are so strong and so sure of victory that they can afford to wait and play with their prey like a cat with a mouse."

"Something tells me, father," said Eric, "that we shall yet win the day."

"See how 'somethings' vary," said the Earl gloomily. "Something tells me that we shall lose it if we do not do something else to win it."

"I know not what more we can do," said Eric. "My 'Ironsides' has been twice fully manned, to-day. One whole crew are now on their way to feast with Odin in Valhalla to-night."

"That is just what I was thinking," said the Earl. "Many have fallen, and yet the gods are angry. They demand a nobler victim."

"Why then did none of us fall in the battle?" asked Sweyn. "The Valkyries were there to make their choice."

"A man who falls in battle is not a victim, he goes to Valhalla of right. He is not an offering to the Gods, but a champion who goes to the feast unbidden and unsent."

After this the Earl paused awhile as though revolving many things in his mind, and at last he said—

"My sons, on yonder isle is a temple of the Gods, thither will I speed once more to learn their will. While I am away, bide you all here by the host, for it is unseemly that all our captains should leave it to itself in case these Vikings of Jomsburg row up to attack us, as is not unlikely, for they must see that they have had the best of it. Thee, Sigmund Brestir's son," he said, turning to the tall Fareyinger, "I will take with me; and thee, Kark," turning to his chief thrall, "I may need thy service."

"Go, father!" cried Eric; "and may the Gods grant your prayer. As for me and Sweyn and the rest, never fear that we will not make

head against these Jomsvikings if they attack us in your absence."

So Earl Hacon stepped into a boat with Sigmund and Kark;—the one as beaming and bright as the day, with his fair face and golden locks; and the other black and scowling as night: the one all chivalry and honour, the other a fit tool for dark and gloomy deeds.

It was but half a bow-shot to the rocky islet, which seemed covered with primeval wood; but, on landing, a steep path led up through the rocks, and presently, through a fringe of pines, they came upon a large clearing in the midst of the wood.

Up to this time the Earl had said nothing, now he turned to Sigmund and said in a deep husky voice—

"Rememberest thou Sigmund, Brestir's son, the warning of the Gods about the victims and the clap of thunder?"

"Yes lord," said Sigmund; "I remember them all."

"Now is the hour," said the Earl, "when it will be put to the proof wheth that was a true token sent by the Gods. In yonder temple,

small and poor though it be, stands an image of Thorgerda Shrinebride, and she will no doubt listen to me her votary, and most of all now when we have heaped such a pile of slain for her and her sisters to choose from, and that not only of these Vikings but also of true Norwegian men."

"Whether she listens or not, lord," said Sigmund, "there lie on land and float on sea many a bonny corpse of warriors, of whom Odin, if he sits as you say this even in Valhalla, need not be ashamed."

"As I say!" cried the Earl; "and, 'if Odin sits in Valhalla!' Who can doubt that what I believe is true, and that Odin sits to-day in Asgard, as he hath ever sat; and will feast his warriors this night in Valhalla, just as he has ever feasted them? Come with me into the temple and see if Thorgerda, who is Odin's messenger, will not listen to my prayers."

"Perhaps," said Sigmund, "she may not be in the temple. If she be a Valkyrie, she will be away sweeping over the waves as they roll the braw bodies to the shore."

"I tell thee, Sigmund," said the Earl impatiently, "the Gods are ever present with men;

present when they enter their temples; present when they skim across the sea in their war-snakes; and present in the throng of battle when swords are crossed and axes brandished high in air. Thorgerda Shrinebride has time for all things; she can choose the slain I have spread for her, and yet listen to my prayers in this poor temple."

By this time they had reached the door of the wooden temple, which could vie neither in work nor material with the temple in Gudbrandsdale, or even with that at Hod.

Entering it without more ado, the Earl, attended by Sigmund alone, threw himself flat on his face before the rude figure of Thorgerda, which stood in a niche at the end facing the door.

But before he buried his face in the palms of his hands, he looked up at Sigmund, who stood by, and said—

"When I pray, I will not so much as lift my face to look at her. I am not worthy that she should give me a sign; but do you look stedfastly at her and mark her face, and see if she clutches yon ring of gold."

"I will do your bidding, lord," said Sigmund; "but I trow she will make no sign."

"We shall see! we shall see, Sigmund," said the Earl. "Be not faint-hearted, but believe in the Gods as I believe in them."

Then he buried his face in his hands, and prayed awhile in silent prayer.

After a short time he said to Sigmund in a hoarse whisper—

"Markest thou aught, Sigmund?"

"Naught, lord!" was the reply.

Then the Earl began to pray out loud, wallowing on the ground before the idol, as he poured out his prayer spasmodically—

"Hear me, Thorgerda Shrinebride," he cried, "mighty to save! Thou whom I have ever honoured since my youth, so that in no temple in Norway whither I have ever come, has thy worship ever fallen short. Nay, to thee have I offered more costly things than to Odin and Thor and the rest of the great Gods. Deign, therefore, to listen to thy votary in his greatest need; and give him a sign and a token to tell him what sacrifice will turn away thy anger, and win this day for Norway. Say wilt thou

have gold, or gems; or sheep, or oxen, or goats? Make but a sign of favour, and thousands of cattle shall be sacrificed at the altars of the Gods, and at thine own not least."

As the Earl prayed thus he looked up to Sigmund and said—

"Makes she never a sign?"

"None," said Sigmund. "Her face is still a face of tree, her wooden arm still clutches her gold ring against her side."

"Thorgerda Shrinebride!" the Earl went on, "I now see plainly that thou art angry with me and with Norway, when thou wilt not accept our offerings. All my store of gold, all my rings, all my horses and all my cattle shall be thine. All these I have offered, and yet thou art still angry. Make but the sign, and Valhalla shall reek to-night, when the victory is won, with fat herds and noble steeds."

And Sigmund looked again at the grim idol, but it made never a sign.

"Gold and rings and cattle and sheep thou wilt not have," the Earl prayed on, "I see thou wilt have the life not of beasts but of men.

But if so, think of the slain, who but this morning were warriors full of life and hope. Say, will not these content thee? and make a sign that I may take as an earnest of victory."

Again Sigmund looked, but looked in vain at that wooden face.

"Whom wilt thou have more?" the Earl went on. "Which of our chiefs or liegemen? Say wilt thou have thine own votary, Gudbrand of the Dale, or Ogmund the White; Arnmodr, Arni's son, is thine already since the morning, and in him thou hast the bravest and the noblest of all Norway's sons, except our own stock. Make a sign—which thou wilt have;" and here the Earl ran over a list of gallant names of his captains, not sparing even Sigmund, who stood by.

Then he buried his face deep in his palms, and bade Sigmund look for a sign; but no sign came.

"What! none of my chiefs and none of my liegemen!" cried the Earl; "and yet many of them Odin might be proud to call his champions! Say, thou most hard-hearted of Valkyries, dost thou require any sacrifice at all

besides those slain in fight before thou wilt turn the day on Norway's side?"

Then, again looking up at Sigmund, he said, "Gaze hard this time, Sigmund, for much depends on this."

Then Sigmund looked, and in the gloom he thought he saw a grim smile steal o'er that wooden face, and at the same time the ring rattled and slipped a little on the stiff arm.

"A sign! a sign, lord!" he cried; "methinks Thorgerda smiled a grim smile, and the golden ring has slipped down a little on the unbent arm."

"Now all the gods be thanked!" said the Earl, "for they are no longer deaf to our prayers. So the gods desire a victim, and a nobler victim than any I have yet offered them. Sigmund, Brestir's son, this token can only point to us or one of our race. All else that is noble, either in Norway or in our host, has been offered and refused."

"So it has, lord!" said Sigmund.

Then the Earl went on with his prayer.

"Thorgerda Shrinebride," he cried, as he bowed and wallowed before his idol; "I see

that thou wilt have a nobler victim than any of those I have hitherto offered, and that, too, one nearer and dearer to myself! 'Tis well; for on a day like this Norway has a right to call for the lives of any of her sons, if their blood will fill up the gap which is yawning to her ruin. Let us begin then from the first and foremost, to the last of the land. For Norway's sake I refuse not to die. Say wilt thou have me?"

Again Sigmund looked. "Lord!" he cried, "there is no sign."

"Odin does not need me yet," said the Earl proudly. "I have still some work left to do for him here, ere he calls me to his feast."

Then he went on—"Wilt thou have Sweyn, my eldest born? In him Norway would lose a gallant captain."

Again Sigmund looked, but there was no sign.

"Now comes Eric," said the Earl; "Eric the wayward, wilful boy, now grown into the bravest and handsomest of men. Second in birth, but first in my love. The gods will not call him. Let him die as he is sure to die—in

fight. Look, Sigmund, look! Gives she any sign?"

Again Sigmund looked, but there was no sign.

Eric was his best beloved, and the Earl's face cleared when he looked up at Sigmund and heard there was no sign.

"The gods are merciful, even in their wrath," he said. "And now, of all my race, there are but two sons left,—both of them boys in age, though they have borne themselves bravely on board my ship to-day. Say, Thorgerda Shrine-bride—for thou hast small choice left—wilt thou have Erlend, Hacon's son, or Sigurd, Hacon's son? Both are free to thee to choose. I will take the youngest first, Sigurd, his mother's darling, only eight years old; wilt thou have him? Look, Sigmund, look!"

So Sigmund looked at the idol, and the Earl looked up at him.

"There is no sign, lord," said Sigmund, after a pause.

"Then wilt thou have Erlend? He has the making of a man in him. Look, Sigmund!"

There was no need for Sigmund to look; for the ring of gold slipped off the unbent arm,

and falling on the floor with a sharp ringing sound rolled to Earl Hacon's feet, who took it up and rose, saying—

"Never say, Sigmund—thou to whom the gods have shown so many signs and tokens—that they never show their will to men. But let us hasten back. Every moment the Vikings may renew the fight. Let them come, they will find in this second bout that the Gods fight for Norway, and that Odin hath turned the scale of battle in our favour."

Then they rejoined Kark, who stood gloomily waiting for them outside.

"Can I be of any service, lord?" he said, coming up to Hacon with a fawning gesture.

"Not yet, Kark, not yet; thy time will perhaps come, by-and-by."

So they hasted down to the shore, and stepped in silence into the boat, which the strong arms of the dark thrall soon rowed with sturdy strokes across the narrow channel to the main.

"Is all well, father?" said Erlend, who, in all the pride of his boyish beauty and young strength, ran down to the shore and caught the bow of the boat.

"All is well, Erlend," said the Earl. "That is, all will be well for Norway this day, if every Norwegian is ready to do his duty by her."

"Are we not all ready, father?" said the boy. "Have we any traitors in the host?"

"None, none, I trust," said the Earl. "But tell me, Erlend, what art thou ready to do for Norway and for me?"

"Anything, everything, father," said the boy. "I will lay down my life for Norway, willingly."

"Well spoken, Erlend," said his father, with deep emotion. "The Gods demand the willing sacrifice, this day, of one of Norway's noblest sons; and they have chosen thee!"

"Me, father!" said Erlend. "Where and how did they choose me?"

"By sure tokens in the temple on yonder isle," said the Earl.

A slight paleness came over the face of the noble boy as he heard his father's words, which, uttered with a sober seriousness, cut off all hope of further life. But it was only for a moment that his cheeks blanched. In another the full current of blood ran back through his

veins, and he said with a dignity which a hero could not have surpassed—

"You said, father, the Gods desired a willing sacrifice. May I choose how I may die?"

"You may," said his father, restraining his feelings with the greatest difficulty. "You may; but it must be soon, for on your death depends our victory. The tide of battle will not turn in our favour till your life-blood hath been shed."

"Never fear, father," said Erlend; "never fear: I will be the first to fall as soon as the battle is joined."

The Earl looked on him with eyes full of tenderness and pride, as his son spoke thus. Then he took him gently in his arms, and embraced him, and said—

"Couldst thou grow to be a man there would be no fear that the old stock of the Barn Earls would not stand upright for ever. The Gods were right when they chose a noble victim and took thee."

Then turning to Sigmund, he said—

"This, I trow, was not the meaning of the Gods when they chose that boy's life. They

looked for sacrifice and a victim, and I thought there might be work for Kark, my thrall here, who before now has sent human victims to Hela when the Gods were angry; but those were mere scapegoats—thralls, and prisoners, the vilest in the land. Here we have the noblest victim ready to offer himself up in the noblest way. We have no need of Kark's service; no axe or sacrificial knife shall touch a hair of Erlend's head. The boy shall be his own executioner. He has devoted himself for the sake of Norway, and he shall sacrifice himself."

Then, turning to Kark, he said—

"Begone on board ship with thy black, scowling face. This deed of blood will not come in thy way."

"I am sorry for it, lord," said the beetle-browed thrall, as he stepped into the boat. "Often and often, at thy bidding, I have dipped my knife in ignoble gore; now I thought it was just about to taste some really rich and noble blood, but the thought was all a dream; so here it goes into the sheath, and bides the time when it may, perhaps, cut an Earl's throat."

"Begone, dog!" cried out the Earl, angrily. "Cut an Earl's throat, indeed! when art thou ever likely to have such an honour?"

"Who can tell?" said Kark; "perhaps you may take Earl Sigvald captive to-day, though it does not seem likely, and then you might make me cut his throat, and I should obey you; or Earl Sigvald might take you, or Sweyn, or Eric prisoner, and then he might force me to cut your throat, or their throats, or all of your throats, and I might be forced to obey him. Thralls in this world have many masters, and their duty is to obey each of them in turn. But I must own, cutting an Earl's throat—"

By this time the boat was under way, rowed by his stout arm, and so the end of the sentence was lost on the Earl, who still stood on the beach with Sigmund and Erlend.

"Cutting an Earl's throat!" he repeated; "however can such a thought have got into the dog's head! But come, Erlend, let us be brave while we can, and tell Sweyn and Eric what is about to befall us!"

"With all my heart, father," said Erlend. "Death has now no bitterness for me, when

I know that in dying I shall win the victory for Norway."

"Noble boy," said the Earl, as they went up from the beach to the ring of warriors in which Sweyn and Eric stood.

CHAPTER VII.

ERLEND'S SELF-SACRIFICE.

As the Earl and Erlend neared the ring of men, it opened out, and the politic leader was soon surrounded by his sons and chiefs.

"How sped your errand, father?" said the ready Eric, who brought out his words while Sweyn was only trying to collect them. "Have the Gods given us sign of favour?"

"The Gods are gracious, as they ever are," said the Earl, "to those who trust in them. Hard as we have been hit this morning, I have now good hope that we shall win the day; but the Gods are only gracious on one condition."

"The Gods gracious on condition!" said the blunt Sweyn. "That amazes me! Are our Gods only gracious on condition? Do they bargain and traffic like traders?"

"The Gods are only gracious to man," said the Earl, "if he is obedient to their will; and

though their will is hard to us this day, we are bound to obey it. They demand a victim, and without that victim their faces will still be set against us."

"Have they not had victims enough, father?" said Eric. "Surely a whole ship's company of mine—let alone all the brave fellows that have fallen on either side to-day—might satisfy them."

"Not wisely spoken, Eric," said his father. "All those who died in fight, died by chance or fate. They were not willing victims, and the Gods desire a willing victim."

"A willing victim!" bawled out Sweyn. "Why, all brave men who fall in fight are willing victims. Thousands have so fallen already to-day."

"More! the Gods demand more!" said the Earl, hardly heeding his son's blunt interruption. "They require one of the noblest of the land as their victim, and they have chosen him themselves by true tokens given by Thorgerda Shrinebride."

"Then, father," said Eric, "if the Gods have chosen one out of the noblest family in the

land, they must have either chosen you, or one of us, your sons; for we, after you, are the noblest in the land."

"True, Eric," replied the Earl; "this time your words are not so foolish. The Gods have chosen one of our family." And as he said this he gazed steadfastly at both of his sons, Sweyn and Eric.

"Is it I, father?" asked Sweyn.

"No, Sweyn," said the Earl. "You may fall to-day, but not as the victim whom the Gods have chosen."

"Is it I, father?" asked Eric.

"No, Eric; I trust you will go through the day unscathed. You are not the victim whom the Gods chose."

"Neither I nor Sweyn!" cried Eric. "It cannot be yourself, father!"

"The Gods have not chosen me, Eric," said the Earl.

"Whom can they have chosen!" cried Sweyn and Eric together.

"He is not far to seek," said the Earl, solemnly; "for here he stands by my side."

"What, Erlend! so young and so pro-

mising!" said Eric. "It cannot and it must not be! Say, Erlend, say by the mother who bore us both, that it shall not be!"

"Brother Eric," said Erlend, in a low but firm and manly voice, "the Gods in whom we all believe have chosen me as their victim, and I am ready to die that Norway may win this day. My father tells me that the Gods desire a willing victim, and I feel he is right. Think how much worse it would have been for Norway if the Gods in their anger had chosen you, or Sweyn, or our father himself. In this they would have been in the right, for the Gods dispose of us all at their good pleasure. But you both, and he full of strength and counsel, are left for the good of the land; and I who have no name and no fame, but only the hope and promise that I would not disgrace our good old stock, part from a world which I have not yet entered, and so end a life which is but just begun. But for all that, I shall have lived long enough, if, by dying to-day a willing victim, I shall propitiate the Gods, and turn them from their wrath against the land. And now let us have no more words.

By my deeds I will show you all how to die; and my last word is, 'Death to the Vikings, and long life to each and all of you.'"

A roar of praise burst from the crowd of men at these noble words of the lad, whose speech went home to all hearts. Eric caught him in his arms; and Sweyn, not so near to him in blood, kissed him on the brow; while Earl Hacon, for once, melted before the eyes of men, burst into tears, and embraced him over and over again.

How long these endearments would have lasted it is hard to say; but the sound of horns borne over the water just then broke upon the ear, and every warrior was instantly on the alert.

"That is the Vikings' signal," said the Earl. "They have given us longer respite than I thought—an hour and a-half. But let them come. I feel grieved, indeed, at what is about to befall my house; but no longer downhearted, nor as if about to fight with a weight round my neck, as I did this morning. Let them come, then; and, in the name of all the Gods, we will destroy them."

The words of the Earl, and the noble devotion of Erlend, roused the drooping spirits of the Norwegians, who rowed lustily out with the ebb-tide to meet the coming foe. No precaution had been neglected on either side to renew the engagement with advantage. But time, as was inevitable, was more on the side of the Norwegians, who were able to replace their slain men with fresh recruits, while the Vikings had only their original force to fall back on. Still, with their tall ships and trained sailors, he would have been a bold man who could venture to say, as they rowed proudly a second time into action, that those terrible warriors would not yet win the day.

On they came as before, in three divisions; but as the tide was now against them, they had to row hard to get into position before they lashed their ships together in the three squadrons; while the Norwegians, coming out on the ebb, drew up in their line with less trouble.

And now the battle began; but not, as in the first bout, so much with missiles hurled from a distance. It now seemed to be the aim of both

sides to make the most of the short winter day, to close with their adversaries, and to fight the quarrel out broadside to broadside, and stem to stem, until one or other was forced to yield.

In this attack, as at the first, Earl Sigvald was opposed to the centre, which was now entirely under the command of Earl Hacon himself; his two sons, Sweyn and Eric, being the first on his right against Bui, and the other on his left against Vagn.

There stood Earl Hacon on the poop of his tall ship—which equalled in size any of the Viking fleet—with many a chief and liegeman at his side, among whom Einar Scaleclang, the Icelandic skald, and Sigmund the Peerless, were conspicuous.

On board the same ship was the devoted Erlend; but he had from the very first taken his stand, not by the side of his father on the poop, but forward on the forecastle, amongst the veterans whose cool courage was specially needed in the bows, when the long-ships encountered one another stem on. Foremost on the cutwater, just where the dragon head of

the Earl's ship gaped with its red maw at the coming foe, stood Erlend, until the two ships dashed together prow to prow. The shock was enough to throw him and those around him on to the raised deck; but they were soon on their feet again, and hurled an incessant shower of spears and darts against the Vikings, who were not slow in replying with the same weapons. As Earl Hacon, with his golden coronet and steel byrnie, was easily recognised by the Vikings, he and his body-guard on the poop afforded an excellent mark for the enemy; and arrows and spears flew so fast in that direction, that had he not worn his steel cap and his arrow-proof shirt of mail, he could not have passed alive through that shower of death. As it was, his steel shirt was so stuck full of arrows that he looked like a hedgehog or porcupine, and had to shake the shafts which bristled all over him out of his mail. At his side, both Sigmund and Einar were wounded, and several were smitten to death.

Much the same kind of fight was begun and continued along all the line; and it seemed as though, in this second bout, for-

tune was about to favour the Vikings, as in the first.

One of the first to discover the evil of such a contest on board Earl Hacon's ship, was the devoted Erlend, who had from the very first shock sought an opportunity of death, but had hitherto been baulked by the space which separated the two ships, as they had each fallen off a little after butting at each other with their prows. The tide, however, which brought the Norwegians into action, now drove Earl Hacon's ship stem on to Earl Sigvald's war-snake; and, at last, to Erlend's delight, the vessels almost touched. This was all that he needed, and with a mighty cry—

"FOR NORWAY AND THE EARL!"

he sprang off the cut-water into Earl Sigvald's ship; and as he lighted among his foes, boy though he was, he smote one of the veteran Vikings dead to the deck. His companions when they saw his mad leap, two or three of them sprang after him, and now stood by his side in the enemy's forecastle. Then the waves bore the two ships apart again, and

the battle lulled a little, while all eyes were turned on the small knot of men who, a small forlorn hope, had boarded the tall "Bison" of the Viking Earl. With a bravery equal to his devotion, Erlend, as he smote his first foeman to the deck, turned to meet a second who hastened up.

"Thorkell, brother Thorkell!" shouted Earl Sigvald, from the waist of the ship, "spare the brave lad; so gallant a deed well deserves that its doer should live to be a man."

Parrying the stroke which Erlend dealt him with his sword, the gigantic Thorkell called out—

"Yield thee, boy, and take the peace which the Captain offers thee; and, if we win the day, throw in thy lot with us, and become a Viking of Jomsburg."

"Thorkell the Tall," cried the gallant lad, "Erlend, Hacon's son, defies thee, and thy Captain, and all thy robber host;" and as he spoke, leaping up, he dealt Thorkell such a blow on his steel cap as made his brain-pan rattle.

At the same time his sturdy companions had each slain their man, and a crowd of stark

Vikings now thronged the forecastle to meet these unlóoked-for foes.

The huge form of Thorkell reeled under Erlend's stroke; but it was not fated that that gigantic frame should fall in Norway. Muttering þetween his clenched teeth — "Well, if thou choosest the sword, thou shalt fall by the sword," the giant dealt Erlend a blow with all his strength just on the throat, where his mail-shirt hardly reached up to the rim of his steel cap. The stroke went home, and a stream of blood burst out and flowed over the links of his harness.

Dealing another, but this time nerveless, blow at his huge adversary, Erling fell to the deck, exclaiming—"So the stock of the Barn Earls know how to die for their country;" while Thorkell, resting on his sword's point, stood over him, more in pity than in wrath. Another jet or two of purple blood—which now poured out of his mouth as well as through the gaping wound—a spasmodic clutching of the hands and shudder through all his frame, and then the eyes of the gallant boy were glazed in death, and the spirit of Erlend, Hacon's son,

passed away in the firm faith that by dying he had saved Norway, and that he should feast that night with Odin in Valhalla.

"'Twas pity, brother," said Thorkell to Sigvald, who now stood by his side, "but the boy brought it on himself."

"'Tis the fortune of war, Thorkell; but lay the comely corse on one side, under the thwarts, and do not cast it overboard."

Then, turning to one of Erlend's three followers, two of whom were already stretched dead on the deck, while he, the third, leaned against the bulwarks, wounded to death with many a stroke, he said—

"What drove him to this useless deed, and why backed ye him in such a fool's errand?"

The dying Norwegian smiled a ghastly smile, and said, with his last words—

"Not so useless as ye Vikings think. 'Twas on no fool's errand that Erlend, Hacon's son, leapt on this ship, and I, his foster-father, followed him. He came to die a willing sacrifice for Norway, and the whole people, in obedience to the will of the Gods, and we—why we came to die with him, that we might follow him

to Valhalla, and feast there to-night with Odin."

As, with failing breath, the warrior stammered out these words, he fell dead to the deck, and the sacrifice of Erlend and his followers was complete.

"Marked you his words, brother Thorkell?" said Sigvald. "When we have to fight with such devoted chiefs, and such faithful followers, methinks we shall find our vows harder to fulfil this evening than we thought when we rowed into battle this morning."

"I never thought, brother Sigvald," replied Thorkell, "that we should find the men of Norway milksops. Let us fight on boldly, and see what comes of it at the end of the day. It will be time enough then to think of fulfilling our vows; but as for mine, I mean to fulfil it, and it will be all the more easy as it hangs upon the way in which you fulfil yours."

"Throw these three corpses overboard, comrades," said Sigvald, as he turned back to the poop.

As he went amid a hail of darts—for after the lull the battle again raged furiously in the

centre—perhaps he thought of Astrida, his darling wife, sitting all alone in Strut-Harold's hall in Scania, and wondered whether he should ever revisit the possessions of his fathers.

But all along the Norwegian line the word ran from ship to ship that, with Erlend's death, the sacrifice which the Gods had demanded of Earl Hacon had been accomplished.

While all hearts rose at the startling news, all felt comforted; and every man renewed the action with the feeling that Heaven would now fight with them, and that the wrath of the Gods had been averted.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GODS FIGHT FOR NORWAY.

When the news came to Earl Hacon that Erlend had fallen with his fellows on the forecastle of Earl Sigvald's ship, he only said—

"Brave boy! the time for mourning is not yet come; this is the hour for revenge. Lay our ship broadside to broadside with this huge 'Bison,' and let us fight it out."

Then, to himself, he said: "The sacrifice to the Gods is finished; we have now done all we can. Let us see if Thorgerda Shrinebride and her sister Irpa will now fight for us."

As he said this, he turned towards the North, and a grim smile came over his face as he saw a bank of clouds gathering in that quarter.

Up to that time the weather, as we have seen, had been fine and bright, with little wind —one of those still November days which, even in the North, are often so mild and warm. In

the first bout, and even in the second, men had got so hot in the fury of the fight, that they had laid aside every wrap, and many of them fought in their bare shirts. But now, about three o'clock, as the sun began to fall, a cold and biting wind blew up from the North right in the teeth of the Vikings; and that bank of cloud, at the sight of which Earl Hacon had grimly smiled, rose ever more and more, till it overshadowed—in so short a space of time that it alone seemed wonderful—the whole heaven.

Still the battle raged, and the Vikings were ever the attacking party, in spite of the bitter blast, which froze their limbs and made their teeth chatter; while the sea, growing "gurly," rose in chopping waves, and their ships—both wind and tide being now strong against them—were no longer easily kept in line. But for all that, the Vikings bore bravely on, and even their enemies could not reproach them for any slackness in the fight.

But this change in the weather was not lost upon the Earl.

"Thanks, Thorgerda Shrinebride!" he exclaimed, as the sky became suddenly dim and

dark, and the warm southern breeze chopped round to a gale from the North. "Thanks. The prayers of thy votary have been heard, and his sacrifice accepted. Show further tokens of thy might."

Then, turning to his chiefs who stood round him on the poop, he cried—

"Behold the gods fight for us at last, and from our own North a blast sweeps the ships of the Vikings out of their line. Pass the word along our ships right and left to press on and break the line and scatter the enemy's vessels."

As the whole Norwegian host bore on with one combined effort, and the ships of the Vikings now at last slowly receded, further tokens from the heavens were not wanting to cheer the one and dash down the hearts of the other fleet.

The sky overhead was now as black as night, and out of the gloomy pall of cloud glared flashes of lightning, and the thunder growled without a moment's interval. This natural phenomenon, so rare in itself in the winters of the North, was enough to strike terror into the hearts of the

Vikings had there been any room for fear in those brave breasts.

"'Tis the thunder of Thor, who, with his hammer, the mauler of giants and robbers, thus fights for Norway," cried the Earl to Sigmund. "What say you now, Fareyinger? Have the Gods heard our prayers?"

"So it seems, lord," said Sigmund; "but the heavens have thundered before, and Thor is not always in the thunder-cloud. I will wait the end of the day."

"Wait, then, while I believe," said the Earl, sternly. "What further tokens could you desire to have than this sudden storm, which in itself is enough to drive our foes before us?"

As the Earl spoke, a further portent followed. Slanting out of the cloud, and straight in the faces of the Vikings, whose faces they could see pale in the darkness, in the prows of their ships, flew a sharp shower of hail, the hailstones of huge size, and each one enough to maim a man.

"Behold yet another token!" cried the Earl, in rapture. "See, the hail falls only on our enemies, and scarce a grain of it falls on our decks. Wind, thunder, lightning, and hail—all

the blasts and shafts and bolts of heaven—fall away from us, and on their devoted heads."

So fell shower after shower of sharp hail, while ever and anon the lightning flashed, and the thunder rolled above the fleets. In such a tempest there was little hand to hand fighting. As the Norwegians advanced with wind and tide, they eked out indeed the artillery of heaven with flights of arrows, and hurled spears and stones; but as for the Vikings, it was as much as they could do to stand up, man for man, against the biting blast and the sharp hail storms; yet they stood, sorely bruised and maimed, behind their bulwarks, and ever turning at bay, slowly and grimly gave way to their adversaries.

On board their ships, too, the sudden change of weather, and the onslaught of the elements dead against them, could only be considered as portents. If the Gods or natural powers ruled the wind and hail and lightning, was it not plain that this attack of all combined proved that there was something supernatural in the shifting of a day so mild and bright into cold and scowling and biting wintry weather?

The common men, as was natural, were the first to feel this uncanny influence; but as the day wore on, and neither hail nor wind nor thunder ceased, the infection—we will not say of fear, but superstition—slowly spread among the chiefs and captains themselves.

As he stood with Thorkell under the lee of the mast in the ship's waist—for there was no standing on the poop—Sigvald said, in a low tone, to his brother—

"Why slew ye the lad, Thorkell? All went well till then, but since he fell, scarce half an hour ago, our luck has turned. Odin, if we believe in Odin, desires the blood of men, and not of boys. Why slew ye yonder lad?" And as he said this, he pointed to Erlend's body, as it lay stiff and stark under the thwarts, the hail falling fast upon its comely face.

"If he fell, brother," said the gigantic Viking, "he fell in his own wrong. 'Tis time to slay the bear's cubs when, if not slain, they will hug you to death. Besides, he meant to die; and had he not fallen by my hand, one or other of your men would have laid him low.

I offered him peace, and he spurned it. What else was to be done?"

"I know not, brother," said the Viking Earl; "but, for all that, I would you had not slain him. With his life went all our luck."

Just then there had been a slight lifting of the clouds, and the shower of hail had passed over a little in that part of the line; but the black bank of mist sweeping slowly down from the North showed that the force of the tempest was only lulled and not spent. In the foreground on the water, between the Vikings and the shore, was the horse-shoe line of the Norwegians pressing down upon them; and behind, upon the hills and hanging low on the shore, swept the dark background of cloud and mist, out of which, at fitful intervals, flashed the red lightning, followed sharply by rolling claps of thunder.

If such thoughts as those we have described filled the bosom of the worldly-wise Sigvald, if he—as far above the superstition of his age as any man then living in the North could be—could not refrain from beholding something supernatural in the war of the elements that had

so suddenly burst upon the Vikings, we may be sure that these feelings of awe were still more common, not only among the crews of his fleet, but also in the hearts of his captains. In a word, the Vikings were above the fear of man or dread of death, but they still bowed before the wrath of heaven, and believed that against those unseen Powers the might of man was of little worth or weight.

On the left wing, Vagn, as we know, was captain of the squadron, and thence with his stem still turned against the beak of Eric's "Ironsides," he maintained no unequal struggle. Wind and tide, rather than the force of the enemy, bore his ships back, but the line was quite unbroken. Broadside to broadside with him lay his foster-father Beorn's ship; and, as the tall ships hugged each other, the old Viking and his foster-child could speak the one to the other from the poop. So, after the storm began, Beorn hailed Vagn—

"Wild weather, foster-child, as my namesake the Bear said when he was snowed up in his lair, and could not scratch his way out."

"'Twill soon be over, and the sun will shine again," cried Vagn.

"Not to-day, not to-day, boy," roared back Beorn. "No more sun to-day for us."

"Never praise the day or blame the day till it is over, foster-father. There, take back one of your own saws."

"This day," said Beorn, "will be half praise and half blame for us. We have had the best of it, and now comes the worst."

"'Tis but a passing storm, I tell you," cried Vagn.

"'Tis a storm that will never pass away for some of us," roared back the veteran. "I tell thee, boy, this is no common storm. Who ever heard of thunder and lightning in Norway when Yule is drawing on. No; these dark clouds have come by witchcraft and the Black Art, in which, as is well known, the dark Barn Earl is so skilled."

"I believe in no Black Arts," cried Vagn. "I believe only in myself, and if I could but fulfil my vow and win fair Ingibeorg—"

The rest of this speech was lost in the storm; the wind caught it up, and bore it far away out

to sea, but from Beorn's ship rose a hoarse chuckle, and then the words—

"Win Ingibeorg! We shall be lucky, boy, if we win out of it with our lives."

All this was before the storm rose to its height; but soon the wind grew so high, and the showers of hail were so sharp, that both Vagn and Beorn, like Sigvald and Thorkell, sought the waists of their ships, and spoke no more for some time.

Then once again there was a lull in the storm, and the two captains again climbed up to the poop.

"How fares it, foster-father?" said Vagn.

"Well! boy, well! but rather bruised with these lumps of ice which Heaven, if you will not let me call it the Black Art, hurls down on us about five to the pound. Earl Hacon gives us good weight with his witchcraft we must say."

"I begin to think," said Vagn, "that it is much as you say, foster-father, and that there is something uncanny in this tempest."

"How so, boy?—speak," shouted Beorn. "Seest thou aught that none else can see?

Thou knowest the second sight belongs to thy stock."

"I seem to see," said Vagn, gazing up into the black clouds above his head, "I seem to see when a new shower of hail is about to burst on us, as though a huge misty shape of a woman rode on the bursting cloud with both her arms outstretched, and pointed with her fingers straight down on our ships; and then the cloud bursts on us, and we are bruised and maimed with these huge hailstones."

"How often hast thou seen this shape, boy?" asked Beorn.

"Twice," said Vagn; "and see! the clouds gather again, and this time for a worse bout. Down into the waist, foster-father, lest these blasts of witchcraft beat us overboard to Ran's cold house to feast with Ægir instead of Odin to-night."

Down into the waists of their ships they both went; and there, standing beside his mast, which swayed under the force of the wind, as though it were about to snap, and while his good ship rolled to and fro, the young Viking, heedless of the hailstones which rattled

off his steel cap, gazed up into the dark clouds again.

Again, just as the big black cloud was about to break, he thought he could discern among the rolling mist a gigantic woman's shape which now came rather flying than riding on the storm; and, again, with outstretched arms and pointing fingers, seemed to lead those terrible sleet-showers against the Vikings.

"It is as I thought," he said; and, leaping up on the gangway which ran round the bulwarks, he called out to Beorn, who was now nearer to him in the waist of his ship than he had been up on the poop—

"Look up, foster-father, up above your head, and tell me if thou seest aught riding or flying on the clouds?"

Beorn gazed up as Vagn bade him, and gazed long, and at last he said—

"I see naught, boy, but the flying scud and rolling broken clouds and mist; but I say not that thou canst see nothing; for I have no gift of second sight, and see only things as they are, and not as others seem to see them. But

sawest thou that witch again? What was she like?"

"Like a woman of the Trolls," cried Vagn; "huge, shapeless, and yet she had a shape; and, as she rode on the storm, she stretched out her arms, and from every finger of her hands the showers of hail fell fast and sharp upon our heads."

"Here are the hailstones, no doubt," said Beorn; "for this big one has just knocked out one of my few teeth. I have not too many to spare, and this is what I get by staring up at the sky in such a hail-storm instead of holding my head low under the cover of my steel cap and nose-guard."

As he said this, he tossed into Vagn's ship across the bulwarks a great lump of ice which would have struck out the teeth of any man however young. Then he went on—

"It might have been my eye, foster-child—that is some comfort; and now what we have to do is to fight on against man or witch, aye, even against the Gods of Norway themselves. Who can tell when the day is done whether we

shall need eyes or teeth, or aught save a cairn over our bones."

"Aye, aye, foster-father," said Vagn, "come what will, we will do our duty, and fight it out to the last."

While this was passing on the right wing, the feeling was much the same on the left of the Vikings, where Bui commanded. When the weather changed suddenly and the clouds gathered, that fearless champion stood on his poop, with Havard Hardhitter at his side, the stout warrior whom his brother Sigurd's wife, Tofa, Strut-Harold's daughter, had given him in token of her love.

At first Bui said nothing. "We have had the better up to this," he thought, "and all will still be well. Let the wind blow."

Then when the black clouds gathered and the red lightning flashed and the thunder growled, he said out loud to Havard—

"This is Thor's welcome to us, Dane; for Thor, they tell us, is the God of Thunder, and the guardian of this land of Norway."

"A rough welcome," muttered Havard, like Bui, a man of few words. "If he wishes to

welcome us, why does he send this wind straight in our teeth? See the helmsman can scarce keep the ship steady with all his strength."

"No milksop is Thor," said Bui. "He greets his friends may-be with buffets instead of patting of the hands."

"May-be," muttered Havard.

When the first sharp shower of hail fell, and even Bui's weather-beaten cheeks tingled as the hailstones pattered on them, he began to pace the deck, and for a while said nothing, till Havard, who paced by his side, asked—

"Be these, thinkest thou, Bui, more of Thor's tender buffets?"

"No doubt," said Bui. "These are his winter morsels which he has stored up all the summer that he might bestow them on us, the warriors whom he loves, now that we have come to look him up in his own land."

This was a long speech for Bui, and for a while neither Viking said a word more.

At last, when the first lull came, and the pitiless pelting of the first shower of hail had passed, Bui, who, alone of all the Viking

captains, had scorned to quit the poop, turned short on Havard, and asked—

"Hast thou the second sight, and canst thou behold things as they are indeed, and not as most men see them?"

"There, at home, in Denmark," said Havard, "I was thought to have that gift."

"We have it in our house from father to son, and Vagn is thought to have it, but hitherto I have never known that I saw aught otherwise than the mass of men. But now, methinks I see something up above. Look up and tell me what thou seest."

Havard Hardhitter looked up; and, after scanning the clouds and the horizon, replied—

"I see naught, Bui."

Then Bui looked up himself, and said—

"'Tis strange; but, as I gaze again, I see nothing. Let us pace the deck awhile; and then, just before that shower bursts which is gathering on yonder hillside, let us look again."

So the two paced the deck gloomily, while the battle lulled amid the uproar of the elements, the two fleets drifting out seaward before the wind and tide.

Then, just before the second hail-storm burst, Bui bade his companion to look again.

"Look! look! now, Havard Hardhitter."

Then Havard looked up; and, in a little while, exclaimed—

"I see her now, the loathly witch! I see her riding on the storm, the nasty Troll!"

"Then thou too seest her," cried Bui. "Thou seest that huge woman's shape, which rides the storm, and sends the hail down on our heads and into our faces."

"How should I not see her!" roared Havard in wrath. "There she flies and floats; and as she stretches out her hands, down fly the hail-stones, which smite us as hard as the strokes from which I take my name."

Then Bui called to one of his sturdiest warriors, who lay snug under the lee of the bulwarks, to come up on the poop.

"Come hither, Eric of Bornholm, I wish to speak with thee."

The huge red-haired Viking rose slowly from his shelter, and climbed the ladder that led to the poop.

"Hail, captain," he cried, as he stood before

Bui, "and thrice hail, and thus greeting and hail-stones meet in one. We are all proud, as we lie in the waist, to see that we sail with a captain who still strides the plank, and scorns shelter even in such dog's weather as this."

"Cut thy words short, Red-Eric," said Bui. "'Twas not to praise my hardihood that I called thee hither, while the hail-stones rattle. Thou art said to be weather-wise: look up now, and tell us what thou seest in the heavens above."

The red Viking looked, and looked long, scanning the sky all around. At last he brought his gaze back to earth, and looked into the captain's face.

"Hast thou gazed thy full?" asked Bui, "if so, tell us what thou hast seen."

"I see," said Eric, "I see that there is more of this to come. Two bouts have we had, and the third will be the fiercest, take my word. I see the scud flying, and the clouds rolling, and wind-galls and lightnings. I see enough that tells me that the storm is not half over, and that we shall have a rough night."

"Never talk of the night till the day be

done," said Bui, almost angrily. "Sawest thou naught else but this, which all can see?"

"I saw naught else," said the Viking in astonishment. "What else should I see?"

"Much, Eric," said Bui, "if it were given thee to see it; and now go back to thy shelter, while I and Havard pace the deck. As soon as the storm lulls we will up again, and be at them, and then let thou and all Bui's men do their best."

"Never fear, noble captain," said the Red-Eric, "I wish I were as sure the storm would lull as I am that we will all fight it out to the last."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BATTLE BEGINS AGAIN.

By this time the two fleets had drifted, lashed together, the Vikings in three squadrons, the Norwegians in one long line, about twice the distance from the shore which they had taken up when the battle began. The centre of the Vikings, in which Earl Sigvald commanded, was, therefore, perilously near the blind rocks and scars, which, in its first position, it had left well in its rear.

This advantage Earl Hacon was not slow to see; and, indeed, it was the common tactics of all the Norwegian leaders, and Eric not the least of them, to drive the Viking-ships on to the rocks, and then to clear their decks while the sea dashed their timbers to pieces.

After the second shower of hail of which we have spoken, the clouds lifted, and there was a long lull; in which, though the sun did not

show his face, it grew less dark, and, as Earl Hacon said, there was light enough to see your foeman's features in a hand to hand struggle.

Then it was that he passed the word along his line to renew the engagement, and to bear down on the enemy, and clear their decks with spears and arrows.

Nor, now that the fury of the storm was over, were the Vikings sorry to fight it out. Their faces and arms were black and blue with the buffets of the hail; and their limbs, a little while before so warm and full of life, were now stiff and frozen with cold. But if the weather had changed in this respect for them, had it not changed for the Norwegians too, and had they not kept as yet their line unbroken, and if they had yielded at all, only yielded to the onslaught of the elements?

To the showers of hail, therefore, now swiftly succeeded volleys of spears, stones, and arrows. Many fell, but the loss was about equal on either side; and, after a struggle which lasted half-an-hour, the Norwegians seemed as far off victory as ever, so stoutly did the three squadrons of the Vikings hold their own against

Earl Hacon's fleet. In this resistance no doubt they were much aided by the tallness and stoutness of their ships, which, as we have said before, towered in most cases over the Norwegian vessels, whose crews had to shoot up at their enemies, while the Vikings shot down on them, as from a strong castle.

This half-hour was, in fact, the turning point of the day, and unless the Norwegians could speedily conquer the Vikings, Earl Hacon felt that the day would be theirs. At the same time as the Vikings fought desperately on, a superstitious shudder, as it were, ran from ship to ship, along all the host, as man told man, across the bulwarks, of the strange uncanny sights which those who had the gift to see them had beheld on either wing in the clouds and mists above their heads. It was plain that the mere change in the weather would in itself be enough to damp the spirits of men fighting for their lives against a whole nation, but when to this forlorn feeling were added whispers of strange things which captains like Bui and Vagn had seen in the upper air, it will readily be believed how the tale grew in its

telling, till by the time the two tides of story met on board Sigvald's ship, they had assumed still more supernatural proportions.

"What is it they say, and what is it they stand gaping at down in the waist, brother Thorkell?" asked Sigvald, who noticed how some of his men stood aghast at something which they had heard from the next ship. Then turning to a sailor who stood below, he bade him come up to the poop, and speak with him.

"How now, messmate?" asked the Earl. "What budget of bad news has been thrown into our ship? If Vikings of Jomsburg could ever fear, I should say you were half of you afraid now."

"We fear no man," said the sturdy Viking. "No, nor Trolls either, if that is the question; but those we fight against are more than either man or Troll."

"More than either man or Troll!" said Sigvald, "then what manner of foes may they be?"

"Send and ask Havard Hardhitter," said the Viking; "perhaps he can tell. As for us we only know what he saw."

"Havard Hardhitter!" said Sigvald, "why how can you, away here in the centre, know what Havard has seen? He is with Bui, far off on the left."

"Ah!" said the Viking, "but for all that we know what he saw; and, for that matter, what Vagn, Aki's son, and Beorn the Welshman, saw on the right. It has been passed on from ship to ship, and so we know it as well as though we had heard it from their own lips."

"And what was it they saw? Neither Bui nor Havard nor Vagn nor old Beorn are cowards, they are good men and true, and what they say they will stand by."

"They say," said the Viking, dropping his voice to a whisper, "that Havard Hardhitter, who hath the second sight, saw up in the sky, over our heads, a huge witch, who rode on the storm, and every time she stretched out her hand—and she stretched them both out—an arrow flew from all her ten fingers, and the man that that arrow struck met his bane."

"Well," said Sigvald, "and so that was what Havard saw! Well, in that he saw clearly; for sooth to say, many of our men

have met their bane by arrows this day, and many more will meet it before we have done. Even if this witch up aloft, whom you say Havard saw, does kill one or two more of us, what does that matter? It pleases her, and does us no great scath. We Vikings of Jomsburg are not going to be scared out of our prey by an old hag."

"Ah, noble captain," said the Viking, "but just as we heard what Havard saw to larboard, news came on the starboard beam that Vagn and Beorn had seen the very same things on board Vagn's ship; and one of the old hag's arrows smote Vagn full on his breast, and had it not been that his byrnie was trusty, the shaft would have flown right through him like the mistletoe through Balder: as it was it glanced off the good shirt."

"Well," said Sigvald, "and what does that prove, but that even these witches' shafts are powerless to harm us? A miss, messmate, is as good as a mile; and now go back to your comrades, and bid them fight on bravely till we win the day."

"Strange though," said Sigvald to Thorkell,

"that both Bui and Vagn, who have the second sight, should have seen something up aloft. But worse than strange is it that these portents should have spread like wild-fire through the host. Bid the horns sound a charge, brother, and dip our standard thrice from the masthead for an onslaught. Then the fleet will take courage, and we may yet win the day."

So the horns sounded and the standard was dipped, and such of the Viking ships as could get out their oars smote the water with them and made head against, and stayed the progress of, the Norwegians, if they did not quite put way enough on their ships to be called a charge.

This rally and check, however, was enough to excite the attention of Earl Hacon, who had stood proudly on his poop with Sigmund and Einar by his side all through the tempest, when he believed that the ancient Gods and Thorgerda Shrinebride were fighting for Norway with thunder and lightning and with wind and hail.

But now that the storm had somewhat abated, and he saw the Vikings making a fresh

stand, he was angry, and turning to Sigmund, said—

"In an ill-hour have we sacrificed our dear son Erlend to the ancient Gods, if they are to desert us in this pinch. See! the Vikings rally, and make head against us."

"Patience, lord," said Sigmund, "'tis but the last flutter of the bird whom the bolt has struck, the last struggle of the fish that the angler hath hooked. Let the Vikings make their last effort and the day is yours."

"The day should have been ours already, Fareyinger," said the Earl. "It will be lost, if these Vikings rally and attack us again. Their hardihood is wonderful."

"Hardy they are indeed, lord," said Sigmund, "and whoever has shared in this battle will never see their like again."

"Praise not the foe, Sigmund," said the Earl, moodily; and as he said this, he turned aside by himself towards the taffrail. There standing by himself, with louted head, he prayed much in this wise—

"Hear me, Thorgerda Shrinebride, mighty to save; stay not thine hand, but stretch it out

once more against the enemy who have dared to invade thy sacred land of Norway, and me thy faithful votary. I have not withholden from thee my darling son Erlend, who has sacrificed himself in obedience to thy will. Dismayed the foe hath been by thy bolts, but he is not yet vanquished. Stretch out thine arm once more, and scatter his host with thy blasts and hail. Come and bring thy sister Irpa with thee. The dead which will now be heaped for thee on decks will be too many even for thee to choose."

While this was passing on Earl Hacon's ship, Sigvald was busy cheering on his men and passing the word along the Viking line to rally for one more effort. But, truth to say, he found the story of the portents which had been so widely spread, so entirely believed, that he had little hope of renewing the combat with the same dash and spirit as before.

Still he put a bold face on it, and when even Thorkell asked him if he thought the Gods were against them in sending such weather, exclaimed—

"Brother! brother! what boots it to talk of

Gods and Trolls and Witches now to us and our host who have hitherto believed only in ourselves and our good swords; to us, by whom, up to this hour, all the Gods and their shrines have been treated alike, not as houses of prayer and faith, but as treasure houses to be robbed and spoiled. What recks it if the Gods of this land which we have come to plunder be against us? we have ever been against them and all the Gods, whether Christian or heathen, alike. What have we to do then but to fight to-day as we have ever fought—against all odds, trusting to ourselves and ourselves alone, and not caring whether both God and man are against us."

"I would not care, brother," said Thorkell, "if I thought this were natural weather."

"All weather is natural, Thorkell," said Sigvald,—"this, like the rest: a storm is but a storm after all, and even these hail-stones," pointing to a heap which lay fast frozen in the scuppers, "huge as they are, are natural. Why brother," he went on with a smile, "men might as well call thee unnatural because thou art so tall. So it is with these hail-stones."

"I say," said Thorkell, doggedly, "that the weather is uncanny, and that Earl Hacon fights not with sword and spear, but with witchcraft and black arts."

"And what if he does, brother? What, but that we shall have the greater glory in winning the day. Let us then be up and at them at once. Even if we have to do with Trolls to-day, it only makes our task harder; all we have to do is to set our shoulders all the more stoutly to the wheel, and if we do so we must triumph in the end."

"Look, brother!" said Thorkell, "where it comes again!"

"What comes again?" cried Sigvald, looking straight ahead, and conning his "Bison," which was just coming stem on to Earl Hacon's ship.

"Not there, brother! not there!" said Thorkell, "not straight ahead, but up above. See, where the clouds gather and the mist rolls, and the whole lift lowers as though the sky was about to fall on our heads; and here again pipes the gale from the north as though it had never blown a blast all the day before. The

old Giant that makes the northern wind is flapping his wings hard, be sure."

"Let him flap them till his pinions crack," said Sigvald; "and let the sky fall if it lists: our path is right on till we have pulled down Earl Hacon and his house, and fulfilled our vows."

As he spoke thus in defiance of heaven, there was a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder, to which all they had heard before sounded like a child's rattle. For a moment all was still after the explosion, but then every ship in both fleets rocked and rolled, and their timbers creaked and groaned, as though a searching spirit were visiting them, and trying every knot and fibre in their frames. Flash and clap seemed to gleam and roar at once; and, while the ships still rocked and rolled, the gale smote them with its full fury, and hail showers, in which the stones were even bigger than before, were hurled in the teeth of the Vikings. They did not seem to fall, but to be driven slantingly in their faces.

In this sudden outburst of the storm, it was not wonderful that the force of the wind and sea accomplished in the Viking fleet what the

Norwegians had all day been trying to do. Against that gale no lashings of hemp could hold equally throughout the line; and as the three Viking squadrons were bearing up against the foe, the elements found out many weak places, and in each squadron many hawsers snapped, and the Viking line was broken.

As for Sigvald's ship, it was so near to that of Earl Hacon, that the bowmen on the forecastle had grappled their enemy before the storm broke; and now, in its height, the two tall ships lay end on—the "Bison," hanging, as it were, to the prow of the Norwegian, while the lashings which held her to the ships of the Viking line on either side snapped short with the sudden jerk.

As soon as the grappling iron caught the Earl's ship, Sigvald, in spite of the storm, had hastened with Thorkell to the forecastle, ready to board his adversary's ship. He had hardly—sorely buffeted and stumbling over the ice-clad deck at every step—reached the bow, when two other jerks on either side told him that the "Bison" was free, and that the Viking line was broken in its very centre. The crown of the

arch was gone, and the whole fabric of his tactics would speedily fall in ruin.

"'Gainst such a storm no hemp could hold," he muttered. "What is to be done now, brother Thorkell?—shall we board the enemy and clear his decks?"

The giant screened his eyes from the pelting hail-stones with his hand, while he gazed steadfastly at the enemy's prow which swarmed with men, while between the whole length of the grappling iron yawned a gulf of angry sea.

"I might do it, brother, and thou mightest do it, and a man or two more, may-be; and if we were not hurled out at once by those bristling spears, we might get in and, like Erlend a while ago, slay a man or two, and then fall one across the other like men. That would be in truth a deed of derring-do, and I am ready to do it, but it would not win us the victory; and even if we try we may well miss our leap, and fall between the ships, in the teeth of such a storm."

The wary Sigvald had seen at a glance, even before his tall brother spoke, the hopelessness of boarding Earl Hacon's ship. At the same

time he knew that the Viking line was broken; and that, when the storm lulled, the Norwegians would be ready to advance in an unbroken line upon his shattered squadrons.

As a skilful commander, he saw that the day was now lost, and that the battle would sink into a series of stubborn contests between ship and ship, in which the numbers of the Norwegians who would swarm round the isolated Vikings would give them a great advantage.

From that moment he made up his mind that the expedition had failed, and that the fulfilment of his vow at least was a thing that could not be.

What he now sought was, not a chance of boarding Earl Hacon's ship in the face of such great odds, but an excuse for turning and backing his ship out of the battle, and for giving a signal to his captains to retreat as soon as possible; as for the loss of life, that would have to be reckoned when the day was done.

There he stood musing with his brother by his side, and shielding themselves as much as they could under the bulwarks, both from

the bitter hail and the sharp spears and arrows which the Norwegians fitfully launched at them, when a gaunt Viking strode up to him, unbowed and unbent amid the storm, and without more ado, said—

"A word with thee, Captain."

"It must be a short one then, messmate," said Sigvald. "This is the time for deeds rather than words. Shield thyself from the hail and shot, and keep your words for a more fitting time."

"There is a time for everything," said the Viking, "and this is the time for words. As for shielding," as he pointed to a spear hurled at him, which quivered in the deck at his feet, "there is no use in shielding a man against what is doomed. That spear was doomed to strike the deck. That was its billet, and there it quivers; but there are other things doomed and fated, and that is what I wish to say."

"Speak on," said Sigvald.

"What I have to say," said the Viking, "is this. I and my mates down in the waist and here on the forecastle, are ready to stand by thee in any quarrel with men; but we will not

fight with thee any longer in this quarrel, which is not against men but Devils."

"Devils!" said Sigvald. "What are devils?"

"Devils," said the gaunt Viking, "you a captain, and not know what devils are! Then I must tell thee. Devils are the Trolls and Goblins and Evil Powers of the Christians; and I believed in them once, and in their power to harm, when I was a little Christian boy: since I have been a Viking, I have believed in myself alone, and on the whole 'tis a comfortable faith for everyday work, and when all goes well with a man; but to-day all does not go well, but bad, and as an apple always tastes of the stock whence it sprung, so I for this day at least believe in Devils."

"I see not, messmate," said the Earl angrily, "what your belief in Devils has to do with me. Believe in them, with all my heart, if you like."

"That is just the very point, Captain," the Viking rejoined. "I believe in Devils just as half the crew believe in Trolls and Witches, and what we all say, and what they have sent me

here to say, is that they will fight no longer with either this day."

"How know ye," asked Sigvald, "that we fight not with men but with Evil Spirits."

"Know!" said the Viking, sinking his rough voice to a whisper, "any child might know that. First of all this sudden change of weather and this storm. That of itself would not be enough. We have all of us been out in weather even worse than this, but then we have not fought a battle out in it. Next, in a lull in the storm, strange tidings run through the fleet from ship to ship, that in each wing those who have the second sight have seen Witches riding on the clouds, and sending hail and lightning and wind down on us. Well! those tidings come to this ship, the heart of the whole host, and just as we're going to fight again, this other storm bursts on us, and blinds and maims us, and snaps our hawsers, and shatters the fleet to bits. So as we lay under the bulwarks a while ago, Kyrielax the Finn, the only one of his race we have in the host, and the only Finn I trow that ever was a Viking, says outright: 'The Captain may as well give the word to cut

the lashings all through the fleet, for no good will ever come to us out of this battle.' Then we all asked him how he knew it, and he said; 'I know it as well as I know that I shall die to-day; for yester e'en, as we lay snug in the haven at the Her isles, I saw it all as plain as day. I saw the beginning of the battle, and how we had well nigh won the day; and then I saw the lull in the fight, and I saw the black Earl Hacon pray to the Gods and consent to sacrifice his son: I saw the battle begin again, and I saw the noble boy fall dead on our forecastle. But I saw more, I saw the storm gathering, and a huge Witch riding on the clouds, and untying big coils of mist; and, as she unloosed them, out flew the wind and hail and red levin bolts. All this I saw last night, and I knew that we should lose the day; and I saw the Witch, as I see her now, up above our heads again unloosing the storm and fighting against us;—and I saw my own face wan and pale in death.'"

"Said this Finn Kyrielax all this?" asked Sigvald.

"Aye, indeed!" said the Viking.

"Then bring him to me, however the storm

pelts," said Sigvald:—"here at once on this very spot."

"Is that thy will, Captain?" asked the Viking.

"It is; why else should I utter it?"

"Then, Captain," said the Viking, "you must bid some one stronger than me to bring Kyrielax; for Kyrielax the Finn is dead."

"Dead!" cried Sigvald, "why, you said he was alive and speaking in the waist a while ago."

"So he was," said the Viking, "but for all that he is dead; for just as he said that he saw the witch then as he saw her before, he called out, 'Now I see not one but two Witches sending the storm against us with twofold force, and from every one of their ten fingers flies a deadly arrow; and lo! here comes one to me!' and, as he said that, an arrow quivered in his breast and he fell dead to deck, and there he lies."

"And what say the men?" asked Sigvald.

"They say as I say, and we all say," said the Viking, "that they will follow thee no

longer in this quarrel, which is against Devils and Ill Powers, and not against men."

"So be it!" said the Earl, who looked round through the mist on his shattered squadrons, and felt that with or without the aid of the supernatural powers, Earl Hacon must win the day.

"So be it! you Vikings of Jomsburg have so willed it. You say the Ill Powers fight against us, and it may well be so, for strange things have happened this day. I will fight no longer against them. My vow was to pull down Earl Hacon, but not to fight with Trolls or Devils, or the Gods of the land, call them what ye will. Brother Thorkell, let the horns sound a retreat; and then let the men get out their oars, and, backing at first, then turn and fly from this unlucky Voe as fast as we can before oar and sail. In this the Gods or Devils of the land are with us :—that the tide is still on the ebb, and the north wind blows fair out of the Voe."

CHAPTER X.

EARL SIGVALD'S RETREAT AND BUI'S DEATH.

Just as the horns sounded the retreat the day cleared as suddenly as it had lowered, and the setting sun shed a lurid glare over the scene of that bloody struggle. Its light was shed over the shattered line of the Vikings, as the ships, now for the most part loosed from their lashings, floated in disjointed patches over the angry waters of the Voe.

As for Earl Hacon he was eager to advance along his whole line, and though he acknowledged with honour the help which the gods, as he believed, had shown him in routing his foes by such a furious storm, he could hardly believe his ears when he heard Sigvald's horns sounding a retreat on board the "Bison," or his eyes when he saw his tall adversary unloose her grappling irons and back out of the struggle.

"Thanks, and tenfold thanks, Thorgerda

Shrinebride," he cried, "Erlend's devotion has been graciously received; the Captain of the enemy is in full retreat; we may not overtake him, but the hour of vengeance has come for such of these stubborn Vikings as refuse to fly. Vouchsafe that, in this too, our victory may be complete. Let not one of these daring robbers leave the land which they came hither to spoil."

After these words he gave orders to his captains to advance and bear down with their overwhelming force on the clumps of the Viking ships, which were tossed up and down in the Voe. Some indeed had already been driven on the rocks and scars, and, thus crippled, afforded an easy prey.

But if Earl Hacon's heart was thus filled with joy and triumph, what were the feelings with which Bui on the left and Vagn on the right heard the signal for retreat! In the left squadron the force of the storm had been felt even more severely than in the centre. On that wing the lashings had snapped in almost every case and the line was broken at all points. In this condition of things, Bui had himself

given the word to cut all the lashings, and to prepare in each ship for the attack which he foresaw would fall on each of them as soon as the storm lulled and the Norwegians advanced. In this isolated kind of action he hoped that the height of the sides of the Viking ships would give them an advantage over the round trading keels of the Norwegians. This was now the sole chance of victory:—to be able to hold their own, ship by ship, against the superior numbers of the enemy, might yet win them the day; but whatever came of it, that stern spirit was resolved never to yield an inch, but to fight it out to the last, and if he could not conquer, to die, having first slain as many as he could reach of the foe.

Nor were Vagn and Beorn on the right wing less vexed at the signal for retreat, or less determined never to fly, but to fight it out. Broadside to broadside, that foster-father and foster-child had borne the fourth and most furious outburst of the storm; and they were ready, as they saw the clouds lift again, to try their chance of boarding Eric's "Ironsides," and to carry her by clearing her decks.

"The fool, boy," shouted Beorn, when he heard the horn, "the fool in his fear has blown the wrong note on the Captain's horn. No doubt by this time either Sigvald or Thorkell—for Thorkell has fought to day on board his brother's ship—has made the craven's head spin off at one stroke. Hark to the fool, the dolt, the coward; why he still blows the retreat when we are all ready for the attack."

"I fear me it is no fool's mistake, but the Captain's order," said Vagn. "That note has now been blown too long; and see yonder the 'Bison' is backing out, and Thorkell's ship with her—shame on them both!"

"Not on both, boy," said Beorn, "for Thorkell was not bound by his vow to follow his brother any further than that brother went: when the Captain turns, Thorkell may turn too. Shame on him for turning and forsaking his vow! But let them go. How dost thou feel, boy—shall we fly too?"

"Feel," cried Vagn, "as full of my vow as ever. I will never fly, nor leave this land of Norway till I have fulfilled it, and slain Thorkell of Leira and wedded fair Ingibeorg."

"Spoken like a man, foster-child. By our Lady—my old Christian oath—I am proud of thee. After all there is something in this love, if it keeps a man up to his work and duty as it does thee."

"Tell me, how dost thou feel, foster-father?" cried Vagn.

"Feel?" roared the old Viking. "I scarce know what feeling is; but if you ask me what cheer, I say at once I am as cheerful as ever—ready, too, to eat or drink or fight, to do anything, in short, but run away. There we are both of one mind. I see, though, that the fleet is scattered to the winds. Pass the word to cut the lashings, and to fight it out ship by ship as soon as the enemy bears down on us. And now, out with your best ale and mead, and let the men drain them deep before the fight is begun again. Let there be no stint. This is the last cup that many of us will drain before we feast with Odin or Czernebog or St. Peter, or wherever the hall may be outside this world, where the good and brave of all races and religions will sit and drink this even."

So the word was given, the lashings cut, and

each ship in that squadron set free to fight or fly as she chose. Out came the ale-casks, and the horns went round fast and free; for the Vikings, after the last wintry hour they had spent while the hail-storms lasted, found themselves chilled and frozen to the bone. "Health to Vagn—Health to Beorn!" they cried as they drank deep, in which exclamations were mingled—"Death to Earl Hacon!" and "Shame on the Captain!" who had fled and not fulfilled his vow.

As Beorn and Vagn pledged one another over their mead, the old man asked—

"Saw'st thou aught, boy, in that last shower of hail? Methought it was far the worst of all."

"I saw," said Vagn, "what I saw before. The same huge woman-shape with outstretched arms and parted fingers, sending the hail down on our heads. But when I beheld her I was not so moved as when I saw her first. Methinks, if I saw her any more, she would seem as needful to me as my daily bread."

"That is the way to treat Witch or Devil as

we Welshmen call them," said Beorn. "'Custom breeds contempt,' as the old saw says, and so it is in this case also. But, see, the enemy bear down on us! Away with the mead-horn, and up with the axe; down with the ale-stoup, and out with the sword. Let us now so behave that, even if we die, all the North will remember us Vikings of Jomsburg."

While these things were passing, the strong ebb tide and wind had borne Vagn's ship swiftly out into the broad Voe. Earl Sigvald, after he had backed out and turned, lingered a while, like a hawk hovering before he wings his flight to a distant land, ere he started on his retreat to Denmark. This little delay brought him in the centre of his shattered fleet, with Bui and Vagn again left and right of him, as they had both drifted out when the lashings were hewn asunder. As they were both within hail, Sigvald spoke them, and bade them fly from the unequal struggle when there was no longer any hope of victory. It is not recorded what Bui said. Perhaps the stern Viking said nothing, but thought all the more on his vow not to fly so long as more men were upstand-

ing than were fallen. It is true he had added, when he vowed it in his full faith in Sigvald's courage,—"So long as Sigvald wills it;" but now that it was Sigvald's wish to fly it was his not to undergo that shame. Their wills did not meet in that, and so he fell back on the first part of his vow and held fast to that.

So Bui said nothing, but Vagn had an answer ready for him, as he passed at full speed under his lee, after bidding him to fly. Up the bold Viking sprung on the rail at the stern, and called out—

"Why flyest thou, most currish of dogs, and leavest thy men at this pinch? Shame take thee!"

As he said this, he hurled a spear with unerring aim at the helmsman, for, in the growing mist of even, he thought that Sigvald was steering his ship out of the Voe. The spear flew true, and the steersman met his death; but it was not Sigvald that there fell; for Sigvald had got so cold in the hailstorms, that his limbs were stiff; and he had, as soon as the "Bison" was under way, given up the helm to one of his men, and himself taken an

oar to warm himself by rowing; and so he escaped the fate which Vagn had intended for him.

So there he rowed away out of Hjoringsvoe, and his brother, Thorkell, with him, with six ships; and for a while they are out of the story. As he went, the indignant Vagn burst out into song, as he gazed after him—

> "There he flies, yon heartless craven,
> He that led us 'neath the knife,
> Soon to fall, in Danish haven,
> In the white arms of his wife.
> Let him go, his vows forgetting,
> We remain to fight it out!
> While this winter sun is setting
> Let us raise our battle shout!"

By this time all was confusion in the Viking fleet. Some few ships, as we have seen, followed Sigvald's example, and fled with him; others were dashed on shore and shattered by the waves, while their crews either perished in the surf, or clung desperately to the rocks and scars. Some—and those some were still many—clustered round Bui and Vagn and Beorn's ships, determined to stand by them, and to sell their lives, now their sole possession, as dearly as they could.

On their side was valour, but it was the bravery of despair; while, on the other, Earl Hacon and the Norwegians now bore down with all the advantages which confidence, courage, and numbers could give them.

The Earl was well aware, as we have already seen, that the Captain of the Vikings had turned and fled.

"Pity," he said to Sigmund, as they were casting off their lashings, and making ready to advance ship by ship against the enemy, "Pity that this sham Earl Sigvald has taken to his heels,—had he stayed to fight it out, we would have raised his head higher than that of any man, Earl or churl, in Norway!"

Then, after a pause, he went on—

"They reckon Bui the Stout their best Captain after Sigvald the Runaway—do they not?"

"So they say, lord," said Sigmund. "They say, too, that he commanded on the left on board that tall ship yonder, round which some of the rest cluster like chickens round the cock."

"Against him, therefore, there is most glory to be got," said the Earl. "Bear down at once

on him, or we shall lose the little daylight that is left; and then he too may escape our vengeance in the night."

"There is no flying in Bui, lord," said Sigmund, "if men speak sooth of him."

"Sooth is often untruth," said the Earl; "but we shall soon try if all the great things that have been said of him be true. Bear down on him."

So they bore down in the Earl's big ship, and she was soon alongside of Bui's bark, scattering the other Viking ships, as she went, with showers of spears and arrows. But they reached her starboard broadside only to find that Thorkell Longwaist had already run his ship, over which Bui's tall ship towered, alongside the Viking to larboard. It was a race between Earl Hacon and the Viking whom he had taken into his grace, and the pardoned outlaw won it; but he won it by his head.

As he saw the Earl bearing down, and knew that Bui and his men would be looking for a fierce attack on the starboard quarter, the bold Viking scrambled up, hauling himself up the tall side by the curved horn of his long axe;

and, before Bui was ware of him, he leapt over the bulwarks and stood single handed in the waist of the ship where Bui—expecting the Earl's attack amidships—stood ready to give him fitting welcome.

Without a word, Thorkell rushed at the Viking captain, and dealt him a blow on the face with his sword. The mighty stroke smote him on the chin, and shore it clean off; and, with it, most of the lower jaw, so that it fell on the deck, and out of it flew Bui's front teeth this way and that.

It was a ghastly wound, but all that Bui said, as he saw his jaw fall at his feet, was—

"The Danish lasses away in Bornholm will now think it not so nice to kiss us, even if we have a chance to get back."

As he spoke, he made a stroke with his good sword at Thorkell. Thorkell Longwaist saw the blow coming, and tried to avoid it by catching hold of the rail on which the shields were hung all round the bulwarks of the ship; but, as he leaned forward, he slipped—for the deck was all slippery from the gore and blood—and he half fell towards the stroke, which

smote him with full force just at the very waist, and cut him asunder as he hung over the rail, and half of him fell overboard into the sea and half stayed on board.

"So we cut our foes in twain, lads," mumbled Bui to his men, for he could not speak plainly without his teeth.

By this time a more terrible foeman was on him. As soon as Earl Hacon's ship came broadside to broadside with Bui, Sigmund Brestir's son, backed by his brother Thorir and thirty men, sprang out the waist of their ship, and into that of Bui, who was just in the act of settling his quarrel with Thorkell on the other broadside.

Before such a force of boarders, led by such a leader, perhaps the most skilful swordsman of the time, it required all Bui's strength and bravery to hold his own. But still his beaten blades, who had so often followed him to victory, rallied round him, and a desperate struggle ensued over the thwarts down in the waist of the ship. As was likely, it was not long before Sigmund and Bui came to hand-strokes, and then the Fareyinger had to own

that he had at last met his match with the sword.

Undismayed by his ghastly wound, from which the blood flowed fast upon the deck, the brave Viking attacked the Fareyinger with such stalwart strokes that Sigmund could not touch him, while he himself was wounded more than once.

At last he bethought him of a cunning trick of fence which he had learned and often practised. So good a swordsman was he, that it was all one to him whether he fought with that weapon with his right or with his left hand. Stepping back, therefore, for a moment, during which Bui's sword smote the idle air, Sigmund tossed both shield and sword up aloft; and, catching the shield in his right and the sword in his left hand, renewed the attack in that left-handed way.

Bui—good swordsman though he was with his right hand—was utterly puzzled at these new tactics. Then, seeing his advantage, Sigmund, at one long sweeping stroke, hewed off both Bui's hands at the wrists; and, never waiting to watch the result of his blow,

leaped back into the Earl's ship with but seven men behind him of the thirty who had boarded with him.

"Hard to win is yon ship, lord," he cried to Earl Hacon; "and yet methinks we have left our mark on them, though so few of us have come back."

As for Bui, he stood a hideous object, without lower jaw and without hands. Though Witherington could fight still on the stumps of his legs, Bui could not with the stumps of his arms.

Still what was left him to do he did. He had kept his vow to go on fighting so long as more stood up than were fallen. He scorned to fly, and it was now his doom to die. There on the poop stood those two great chests full of gold, which he ever bore about with him, and which he would not part from even in death. Climbing up to the raised deck where they stood, he called out as he thrust each stump into the handles of one of the chests—

"Overboard! all Bui's lads."

Then he hurled himself, with the chests hooked on his stumps, overboard; and neither

he nor his chests were ever seen again. Later stories told how, like Fafnir the Dwarf, Bui the bold Viking had been turned into a huge snake at the bottom of the Voe, and that he lay there till Doomsday brooding over his hoard of gold. So ended the life of Bui the Stout. As for his men, some followed his lead and leapt overboard after him. They had obeyed him in life, and now his word was law in death. The rest, under the guidance of Havard Hardhitter, were bold enough to try to take Earl Hacon's ship by boarding; and swarmed over the bulwarks, and for a while maintained a desperate fight. They had already cleared a space on the starboard gangway, when Thord, from Alvidra in Iceland, and Vigfus, Viga-Glum's son, rushed to meet them. Backed by the Earl's men, these two Icelanders drove the Vikings back to their own ship, which was now boarded by Earl Eric as well. Then ensued another stubborn struggle, in which Thord of Alvidra lost his right arm, and Vigfus was severely wounded; but the end was that Havard Hardhitter lost both his legs, which were hewn off below the knee, and yet for a while he fought

on his stumps. At last every man was left lifeless on the gory deck, and Bui's ship was cleared from stem to stern. No quarter was either given or asked. By their deeds the Vikings had put themselves out of the pale of peace.

Next day when all the goods of the Vikings were brought to the pole, or, as we should say, to the hammer, that good ship and her gear—all except Bui's golden store—formed one of the proudest trophies of Earl Hacon's bloody victory.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VICTORY AND WHAT BEFELL VAGN.

After Bui fell, his brother Sigurd the Champion had no longer any vow to fulfil. He had vowed not to fly so long as Bui was alive, and now that Bui was dead he was free. He rowed out of the Voe, therefore, with his own ship, and such stragglers as joined themselves to him. These, together with those which had fled with Sigvald and Thorkell, made up four and twenty ships that escaped out of the battle; all the rest were either taken or sunk by Earl Hacon and his men.

After the ship of Bui had been cleared and all his men slain, Earl Hacon and the ships belonging to his own squadron in the centre, went on from cluster to cluster of the Viking ships, running them down and sinking them, or driving them on shore on rocks and scars. For this there was little daylight left, but Earl Hacon

and his sons Sweyn and Eric were no sluggards at their work; and so at last there were but two ships left of all that mighty host in the hands of the Vikings, and these were those of Vagn, Aki's son, and his foster-father Beorn.

These too would have been attacked had the daylight lasted; but, as it was, they escaped notice behind a scar, and there they remained till night fell upon the scene of carnage. There they lay, the refuge of many a man whose ship was sunk or water-logged, but who had made their way to Vagn and Beorn, as the only captains left.

As the night fell, Earl Hacon made for the shore, and his horns sounded the recall to all his men. There on the shore now strewn with wrecks and corpses thrown up by the waves, he stood proudly welcoming his men as ship after ship made for the land.

"Welcome! good men and true, all of you who have stood by us this day," he said:—"to you, after the Gods, we owe this great victory —greater than any since that which my ancestor Harold Fairhair won in Hafursfirth; and now put up your awnings over your decks, and

bind your wounds and take your rest, and eat and drink. We have not yet made an end of these Vikings; for all around, on rocks and scars and on half-sunk ships, many of them still lurk,—some of them, it may be, wounded to the death, others unhurt, of whom we will dispose to-morrow as justice and right require. To-night, there is but one thing I wish some of you to do; and that is, to weigh the hailstones which lie about, for such hail has never yet been seen in Norway."

So they weighed the hailstones which lay all around unmelted in heaps, and found that many of them weighed two ounces or more.

"Two ounces of hail is good weight, lord," said Einar Scaleclang, as he weighed the hailstone in the scales which the Earl had given him only that morning.

"A good handsel, Einar, of our gift," said the Earl. "Let not these hailstones, nor Thorgerda Shrinebride and Irpa her sister, be forgotten in that song which thou wilt make on this victory."

Then the Earl went up, with Gudbrand of the Dale and Erling of Skuggi, to the Grange;

and there he ate and drank and was merry over his victory, while his men bound up their wounds and made the best cheer they could; and then, sore and stiff and battle-weary, they sunk down to sleep except a few men who, with Earl Hacon and Gudbrand of the Dale, sat up and watched through the long winter night. Sigmund, too, sat with him, and his son Eric.

"Have we boarded all the ships, Eric?" asked his father.

"All but two, father, which lay behind a scar. They were bravely defended; for we tried twice to board them from the 'Ironsides' and were beaten off. I think the captain's name was Vagn, Aki's son; for I heard his name shouted out in the fight."

"They will be off and away in the night," said the Earl; "that is, if they can find their way out. If not, we will look after them in the morning; and then both Thorkell of Leira and Ogmund the White may have their revenge on that bold Viking."

While the Earl and his men were safe and warm and disposing of their beaten enemies,

Vagn and Beorn and the remnant of the Vikings passed the night not nearly so comfortably in their ships.

As soon as they had beaten off Eric's last attack, and had heard the horns recalling the Norwegians to the shore, Beorn and Vagn knew that they had breathing time till the morning, and might take counsel as to what was best to be done.

"Before we go any further, foster-father," said the young Viking, "let me tell you a great piece of news."

"What is it, boy? out with it," said the old Viking, with a loud laugh. "Is it good or bad?"

"That is just as you take it, foster-father," said Vagn. "It is that my ship is so battered by the butting of that 'Ironsides' that she is not seaworthy, and in fact is well-nigh water-logged already."

"Well! that *is* strange," said Beorn. "I, too, had a bit of news to tell, and now my bit of news and your bit of news dash their heads together like two warsnakes. Listen! my ship, too, is water-logged, and, in a word, she would

sink to the bottom had she not taken the ground already."

"I call both bits of news good, foster-father," said Vagn.

"And so do I," said Beorn, "because there can now be no question of sneaking out of the Voe and running away. Here we must stay and fight it out with Earl Hacon. Never mind, as it is we have lived one day longer than Bui and the rest of his men."

"So that is settled. Here we stay," said Vagn; "and, after that, what is best to be done?"

"What else is to be done?" asked Beorn.

"We have two choices left, neither very good, but to my mind, one better than the other. If we cling to our ships, as soon as day dawns Earl Hacon will be down upon us with all his force, and will make mincemeat of us in no time; but if we can make a raft and so float to the shore, we can choose our own time, and fall upon them as they sleep, and do them some harm, and after that we may make off, and save ourselves by passing rapidly down the land till we can seize a ship, and then let the

sea keep her own, for if any men are the sea's own 'tis we Vikings of Jomsburg."

"Not a bad plan at all, boy," said Beorn. "Thy pate has more in it than mine after all. I should have stuck to the ships, but what you say is best."

"Now, let us have some supper and drain another horn or two of mead, and then let us make the best raft we can and set off on our sail to the land."

"With all my heart, boy."

So they ate and drank and drained the mead-horn once more, and when they were all full, they made a raft out of their mast and yard and a spar or two, and lashed it alongside; and when they were all on it, some eighty in all, the last remnant of that mighty host, they cast off the lashings and hoped they should soon float to the land.

But here, as elsewhere in life, hope was doomed to be disappointed. After a long tossing about, during which the salt spray beat over them and drenched them to the skin, they drove up, as they thought, upon the land, and landed only to find it nothing but a little

skerry, and that they were as far from the mainland as ever. To make things worse, their raft took the ground so firmly, that all their strength was unable to get it off again. So there they remained the rest of the night; and there ten of the eighty who were sorely wounded died of cold and loss of blood.

It was lucky for the rest, however, that, though the waves were still high, the wind as soon as that last hailstorm was over fell light, and that the night was far milder than the day. But for all that, and in spite of the good cheer they had made before leaving the ships, when the morning came they were all much worn out with toil and cold.

And now as the dawn broke there was a stir in the Norwegian host, as men woke to a sense of their soreness and their wounds; but at the same time a proud feeling arose that they were worthy children of Norway, which they had saved from the yoke of the Vikings. Though many had slept all through the night, many had no rest or could take none. All night through, the leeches passed from ship to ship, binding up limb or head or body wounds,

shaking their heads at the hopeless cases, but still binding on till day came, and they found there were more still—many more wounds to bind.

All along the strand tents had been pitched, besides the awnings over the ships; and it was in those land tents that the leeches were most busy, and the worst cases brought to them.

The Earl himself was not then on the shore; he had watched through the night up at the Grange, and was now taking a short rest while all were awake. But Sweyn and Eric were both down on the shore, praising and comforting their wounded men, and seeing with their own eyes that the leeches did their duty. It so chanced that as Eric passed thus from tent to tent, he spied a man who stood at a tent door, all wan and pale, and said to him,—

"Thorleif Scum," he cried, "why art thou here, and why dost thou look so wan, as though thou wert hard at death's door? Speak, art thou wounded?"

Then Thorleif answered the young Earl:

"I could not know when I dealt Vagn, Aki's

son, that blow with my club yesterday that his sword point would give me a scratch."

"In an evil hour hath thy father then gone out to Iceland, if thou shalt now die here in Norway."

Then Einar Scaleclang, who stood by, burst out again into song—

"There in Iceland lives the sire,
Here in Norway dies the son,
What can heal the heart's desire
For those whose early course is run."

Then Thorleif Scum fell down dead at Earl Eric's feet.

Before they had time to lift him up the crowd of men, who stood on the shore, heard in the clear morning air how a bowstring sung high on board Bui's ship, which lay off the strand, and the whistling of an arrow followed it, and that arrow smote Gudbrand of the Dale, the Earl's kinsman, who sat richly clad on the beach, and took him under the arm-pit, and he needed nothing more, but fell at once dead to earth. Then they crowded round him and helped him up, but they could do nothing for

him but lay him out for his burial, for he was beyond all leech-craft.

This bad news greeted the Earl as he rose from his short rest. As soon as he awoke he called for Gudbrand, but no Gudbrand came. Then they told him what had happened, and he cried out,—

"Alive or dead these Vikings of Jomsburg do us great scathe. I thought we had left never a man alive on board Bui's ship, and see, here flies an arrow from her in the twilight, and strikes down one of our best men, and dearest friend."

Then the Earl bade them shove off a ship or two, and go round the Viking wrecks and hulks, from ship to ship, and to scan them well, and to take care that not a man was left alive to do them any further hurt.

So Sweyn, his eldest son, and Thorkell of Leira ever greedy of blood, shoved off in a ship, and went first to Bui's war-snake, but yesterday so full of brave men, but now so seemingly lifeless and helpless.

As they searched the ship they found, propped up in the bows, against the cat-heads,

a man who still had a little breath in him, though he was sorely wounded. It was Havard Hardhitter, Bui's follower; both his feet had been hewn off the evening before, as we have heard, and he had been left for dead. But for all that he had crawled and propped himself against the bulwarks.

As Sweyn and Thorkell came up to him, he chirped out in a thin weak voice,—

"How is it, lads? tell me, did any keepsake come hence from this ship to you on land this morning, or no?"

"Of a truth it came," they said. "But was it thou that sent it?"

"It is not to be gainsaid that I sent it you," he answered; "but say, did any man get his hurt when the arrow found its billet."

"The man it hit met his death," they said.

"That is all right," he said, "but who was the man whom it hit?"

"Gudbrand the White, of the Dales," they said.

"Aye," said he; "then it was not fated that I should have my wish. I had meant it for the Earl; but for all that I am well pleased if it

slew some one whom ye think it scathe to lose."

"What is thy name, man?" asked Sweyn.

"Not a bad name for battle; they call me Havard Hardhitter."

Here Thorkell of Leira broke in with,—

"Let us not even look at him, Sweyn, but slay this dog as quick as we can."

As he spoke, he smote him with his sword, and then the rest ran up and stabbed and hacked at him till he would have been dead if he had ten men's lives.

So they went on searching ship after ship, and putting any wounded men, who had lived through the night, out of their pain, till they came off the skerry on which Vagn and Beorn lay with their men, half frozen and starved to death.

"What be those yonder, Thorkell?" asked Sweyn.

"They look like cormorants, all of a row," said Thorkell; "though they are no cormorants, but men and Vikings. Ten, twenty, thirty, fifty; more than I can count. These men will die hard, Earl; we had better not attack them with

this one ship, but go back and tell the Earl what we have done and seen."

So they put back, and the Earl met them on the shore.

"Have ye sped," he asked, "and done my errand on the man who shot that arrow?"

"We have, father," said Sweyn; "that right hand will never launch arrow more."

"Would it had not launched the last," said the Earl, "then Norway would have one brave man more. But what was the bold fellow's name?"

"Havard Hardhitter, lord," said Thorkell; "and, never fear, we hit him hard too. There is not a bit of the dog left so big as my hand. So perish all the Earl's enemies; but he put a bold face on it to the last, and died hard."

"Found ye no more men?" asked the Earl. "Are these Vikings all dead or drowned?"

"Not so, father," said Sweyn. "But on the skerry yonder, a mile or so out, be a band of men, a whole ship's company I should say, or thereabouts; ye may see them clinging to the rock like cormorants, while the surf breaks over

them. We came to take your orders as to them.

At this news the Earl rubbed his hands in glee.

"This is news indeed. Then we shall have some prisoners to behead. I will not spare one of them. Put off four or five ships, and seize them, and bring them back straightway to me."

So the ships were shoved out, and a force of full five hundred men rowed out to the skerry, where Vagn and Beorn lay half dead. Most of the seventy were more or less wounded, and they were all far gone with cold and weariness. Against such odds not an arm was raised even by Vagn. One after another they were seized by the Earl's men, bound with their hands behind them, and so brought to land.

They were most of them in such a pitiful plight, that even the stern heart of the Earl could not refuse them food, and so they had coarse porridge and bowls of milk brought to them, and then they were all bound with their hands behind their backs, by one long cord, something like the strings of horses one sees coming from a fair.

"Let the dogs eat," the Earl said, "lest they die of cold and hunger before we can chop their heads off; and now let us sit down to eat and drink. After we are full it will be fine sport to sit by and behold the beheading of these Vikings.

CHAPTER XII.

EARL HACON'S FEAST.

So the Earl and his men sat down to their morning meal in their tents, while the prisoners supped such sorry fare. The meats were not dainty, but they were ample, and there was good store of ale and mead, not only from the cellars at Hjoring, but from the ships of the Vikings, which had already been ransacked in search of spoil.

"Wine, too," said the Earl, as his cup-bearer handed him a huge horn of French wine, which had been found in a cask in a bulk-head of Bui's ship. "Wine, too; on my word these Vikings fared sumptuously. This wine was the spoil which they took from some Frenchman trading in the Northern seas, and now we have taken it from them. Here's to your health, Thorkell of Leira. Drink deep in answer to my pledge, but not too deep, lest

your hand should not be steady for the work I am about to set you."

"What work is it, lord?" asked Thorkell, as he drained the horn and laid it down. "There is no work you can set me which I shall not be glad to perform."

"This is work, Thorkell, which I know will please you right well. What say you to beheading all these Vikings one after the other with your sword?"

"Rare work, indeed, lord," cried Thorkell, with a savage twinkle of his eye, which showed how welcome the deed of blood was. "Rare work, indeed, though there be so many of them. Let me see how many. Did we not seize and bind seventy of them on yon skerry? Seventy heads all of a row, that's rare work for a man."

"Why, Thorkell," said the Earl, egging him on, "you know men say that no man can hew off three men's heads one after the other without blenching and changing colour. How ever will you be able to chop off seventy?"

"Never fear, lord," cried Thorkell, "with these Vikings I may say it will be the more the

merrier. And if the last man be only Vagn, Aki's son, who vowed to take my life, and wed my daughter Ingibeorg, just see when he comes under my sword, if I do not make his head spin off as merrily as all the rest."

"Very well, Thorkell," said the Earl, "all this will soon be put to the proof. Be it yours to behead them as soon as our feast is over. But no! we must first bring all this spoil of the Vikings to the pole and sell it, and when that business is over we will have the pleasure of beholding the beheading of the prisoners."

So the feast went on, and soon grew fast and furious, and even if Thorkell of Leira, who was to be headsman, kept his hand steady, it was more than many others did.

At last that feast, too, came to an end, and all the captains, and a whole host of the warriors and freemen thronged the beach, where, under the shadow of spears set upright, great heaps of Viking spoil were brought to sale.

We have already described the process of such a sale in narrating the Viking voyage of Vagn and Beorn along the Baltic coast. Every-

thing went much the same here, except that everything was on a grander scale.

So the sale went on, the Earl claiming this, and some great chief that, and some freeman of lesser rank that, as each object took their fancy, till everything had been brought under the spear, and there was nothing left to sell.

All this time the heap of silver, among which there was little coin, for those were the times when silver passed by weight in ounce and pound—all this time the heap of silver, which was poured into a huge bearskin stretched on the ground went on growing and growing till it looked for all like a pile of wood or heap of grain than anything else.

At last the crier who had put up, as we should say, each piece of the spoil, called out to the Earl, who sat on a log close by,—

"All is done, lord; naught now remains to sell."

"Say you so," said the Earl; "then I think it may be said there hath been no such sale in Norway in the days that men mind. Not even Harold Fairhair took such spoil at Hafursfirth. To-morrow we will claim our share, and allot

their shares of this silver to our liegemen, chiefs, and to the freemen who have stood by us and Norway in this fight. And now, Thorkell of Leira," he went on, turning to that chief, "hast thou ground thy sword sharp?—the prisoners' share is still to come."

"Sharp she is, lord; my darling is eager for blood." And as he said this, the blood-thirsty thane swung his broad sword through the air till it whistled again.

Just then there arose a shout from a knot of men on the shore, on which the flood tide ever and anon threw up ghastly tokens of the struggle the day before. All round the horse-shoe bay the corpses of those who had fallen and been thrown overboard, or who had perished pierced by spear or arrow when trying to swim to land when their ships were sunk, lay tossed about in the surf till the ebb should leave them high and dry. But this was so common a sight that the shout betokened something of greater interest than the mere lifeless frame of a slain foeman, or even of a Norwegian who had died for his country. These would all be gathered together and in-

terred, but the time for burial had not yet come.

"Why do they shout?" asked the Earl eagerly. "Some of them did not shout so loudly yesterday, when Bui all but broke our line. Go, Sigmund, and bring me back word why they shout."

The fearless Fareyinger obeyed, and soon came back with the words,—

"What they shout at, lord, is something which it befits you to see with your own eyes rather than to hear others tell of it."

"You, too, mealy-mouthed, Sigmund," said the Earl, "I thought there was naught which my ears might not hear; but if I must see and not hear, I will behold it at once."

With these words he rose from the log, and was soon amid the knot of men.

"Why shout ye so!" he cried, as he burst through the ring, and then all at once his eyes grew fixed, gazing steadfastly at something that lay on the shingle.

There, half on land and half in sea, lashed to a spar, lay the comely corse of his son Erlend, which Sigvald had bade them thus

commit to the deep, as he was speeding on his flight out of the Voe.

"Let his own folk bury the boy," he said. "We shall not rest on our oars long enough between this and Denmark to do him fitting honour."

And so borne hither and thither by wind and tide during that night and morning, that noble corpse had at last been thrown by the flood tide on the shore almost at his father's feet.

"Erlend, my Erlend!" said the Earl, "the sea has done her duty as he did his, and borne him gently to the land he died to save."

Then, bending over the body, the features of which, though wan and pale, still bore a sweet smile in death, the Earl, commonly called so hard-hearted, shed tears; and Sigmund, who had already twice seen him moved in the shrines of the Gods, now saw that Hacon could weep as tenderly as a woman for his own flesh and blood.

As the Earl gazed and bent over his son, the knot of men broke up and stood back in silent homage to a father's sorrow. It was only for a moment, however, that the Earl was thus

unmanned. Dashing aside his tears, and swallowing his grief, he turned suddenly round, and said,—

"We will bury the boy after the ancient fashion here on the shore this very day. Like a hero, or like Balder the Good, he shall be buried in his ship—or better still, in Bui's ship, which we took yesterday; thus the bravest of our foes shall do honour to Erlend even in death. But unlike Balder, he shall not be burnt, but buried under a cairn in the ship, with his good sword and shield and byrnie and all his war-gear. Nor shall he go unattended to Valhalla. Round his cairn we will slay these Viking prisoners. Those who are said to be so brave shall bear him company."

A murmur of applause followed these words, for all felt that he that had devoted himself for Norway should have a royal burial.

"Go, Sigmund, and you, Einar Scaleclang, and you, Eric and Sweyn, and bid them to haul Bui's ship to land. Some of you get ready the rollers, and on them let her run up high and dry, far above the highest tide-mark. Never again shall that good ship flash down the

rollers like fire to the sea. Her last cruise is over on earth; in her, Erlend's bones and those of the victims shall rest while their spirits pass to Odin's hall."

With the force of men of which the Earl could dispose, it took less time than might be supposed to bring Bui's ship on shore. Those who have seen the Deal boatmen haul one of their large luggers on shore will be aware that it is an operation which requires more skill than time. The proud ship, the terror of the Baltic, and the defence of the Viking fortress from the day that she had been built under Bui's eyes in Bornholm, soon lay idle and empty on the Norwegian shore.

In the meantime six stalwart chiefs had brought a bier covered with sprigs of pine and juniper, and lifting Erlend gently on it, had borne him away from the sea, and laid him on the green grass. There Earl Hacon needed not to close his eyes. Some pious hand had performed that duty amid the showers of hail on Sigvald's ship. As soon as the ship which was to be his tomb was in position, the bearers bore the body up a stage into the high poop

and there it was reverently laid with the hands folded on its breast. There, with his golden hair, which fell in locks on his shoulders, Erlend lay, with his steel cap on his head, and his arms by his side. His byrnie, or shirt of mail, he still wore from the battle. There he lay, beautiful in death, the noble boy who had died to save his country.

As Earl Hacon stood by his side, Einar Scaleclang burst out into song—

"Red wounds are lovelier than the rose
Or rosy lips to me,
But still his praise be bright as fire,
Be boundless as the sea,
Who dares in blood and pangs expire,
To set his country free."

"Thanks, Einar, for so much of thy dirge," said the Earl, "when it is finished it will be worthy of Erlend; meantime take this ring, which I had meant for him had he come out of yesterday's fight alive."

While these things were passing, a host of men had been labouring to throw a heap of earth all round the ship, and, in fact, to bury it under a mound. They all worked with a will, and in an hour or two had heaped the earth up

as high as the bulwarks, so that one stepped from the earth down into her waist.

When they had got so far the Earl thanked them from the poop, and bade them halt a while.

"You have worked with a will, like good men and true; the cairn is now breast-high, and before it can be filled in, something else must be done, and that something will at once be a token of love and honour for Erlend, and a sign of wrath and shame to our enemies. We will now behead, on the grass round this unfinished cairn, our Viking prisoners. They, robbers as they are, are too much honoured in leaving the world in Erlend's company."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VIKINGS IN CAPTIVITY.

WHILE the spoil was being sold and the burial of Erling prepared, Vagn and his companions had lain bound in one string and huddled together in a barn. Meat and drink of the coarsest kind they had given them, as we know, by command of Earl Hacon, that that they might keep body and soul together and not die of hunger or thirst before the hour of their doom came.

But even in that dread hour nothing could daunt the courage either of old Beorn or his young foster-child; nor, truth to say, was there one of all these seventy Vikings who showed the smallest sign of fear. Even in wounds and death they were true to their code. No groans therefore were heard in that gloomy barn, and not a sound except that of cheerfulness was uttered, though the rush of air

through the gaping wounds of such of them as had received trunk or body wounds caused ghastly noises, well known to the leeches who tended the sick after a battle.

"What think you they are at now, boy?" asked Beorn, as he heard the shout which welcomed Erlend's body. "Some of them shouted in a very different note yesterday."

"I think and care little what they are doing, foster-father. All I care about is that I should die here like a rat in a trap, and not fulfil my vow."

"You have done your best, boy, and the best can do no more," said the Welshman.

"That's what you always say; but if only fair Ingibeorg——"

"That's what you always say, boy," roared Beorn. "I tell you what, I am sick of Ingibeorg; what's the use of thinking about her now, will thinking of her marry her to you?"

"It is such a pleasure to think of her. I always think of her," said Vagn.

"Then you had better leave off the bad habit at once, and for ever. There is a time for all things: young men may think of

maidens when they have nothing else to think of. Twice or thrice in the year, perhaps, not more. Now do you know what you ought to be thinking of?"

"What?" asked Vagn.

"Well!" said Beorn, "I suppose its because I am 'fey' and like to die; but now lying in this barn, all the old things and stories of my childhood seem to come back to me, and my ears are full of the songs and carols which the good monks used to sing to me when I sat in my father's chapel in Deganwy."

"'Tis a pity you are not with the monks in East Gothland, whom we spared in the autumn. Think you of your hymns and your monks, and let me think of Ingibeorg; but do you know, foster-father, if you feel 'fey,' of which I see no sign, I feel so full of life as if I never could die, much less to-day."

"That's the young blood which fills your veins," said Beorn. "Try and make Earl Hacon look at it in the same way, and then your feeling will be some good. As for me, I feel if I must die I must. Every man must die when his hour is come, and until it

comes he must live. Were it not for parting from you, boy, I should not mind dying, and to get rid of all this toil and trouble which men call life."

"But if we die, we shall both die together, foster-father."

"So we shall! I never thought of that. Well, that is one comfort," said the old Viking.

So they went on talking and talking, and wondering why no one came to them. As the day wore away Beorn broke out with—

"If they don't come soon it will cost Earl Hacon something. He will have to give us all another meal out of his hog-tub, for it is not seemly that, a great prince as he is, should starve his captives before he cuts their heads off."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the tramp of men and the rattle of arms was heard outside, and then voices close to the barn-door.

"Come hither Kark," said a commanding voice; "'tis thine to begin the execution of these Vikings by putting an end with thy knife to those who are too badly wounded to

walk to Erlend's cairn. But, now I think of it, tell me why thou spokest yesterday of cutting an Earl's throat."

"I spoke as the words came into my mind, lord; and, besides, away in Ireland, where I was free before I was taken prisoner and sold to be a thrall, an old wife spaed my fortune; and what she said was, that I should slay an Earl before I died and then be raised higher than any one in the land."

"That means, perhaps," said the Earl, "that you will be hanged on the highest gallows in the land."

"I know not, lord," said the thrall; "but I have always looked forward to slaying an earl; and so yesterday when we had two earls, you and Sigvald, fighting against one another, I thought I might have the good luck to kill one or other of you."

"Be not saucy," said the Earl, angrily, "or I will strip all the skin off thy body with scourging. Even had Earl Sigvald—the runaway—fallen into our hands, Thorkell's or my own sword, and not thy sorry knife, would have slain him. But no more of this.

Throw open the barn doors wide, you and your fellow thralls; and then go in and bring the Vikings out, and slay on the spot all that are unable to stand."

"Sorry knife!" muttered the thrall to himself, the black Celt. "Sorry knife! for all that I am sure it will taste Earl's blood before it is worn out. But it has tasted lots of blood in its time, and to-day it will taste more."

As he said this he threw open the doors of the barn, and rushed in on his errand of death.

"Up with you all," he cried, "up and away to your place of slaughter. But if any of you are so dainty that his knees are stiff and weak, or if he finds the cold air too keen for his inside as it rushes through his wounds, let him lie still till I come and cut his throat."

All this the dark wretch uttered with a fiendish glee, which, however, only provoked a ghastly merriment from the mouths of his victims.

"Come hither, thrall, Irish dog," said a tall

Viking, smitten to death, who could scarcely stir, much less rise on his feet. "Come hither, I say, and cut my throat first."

"With all my heart," said Kark, as he flew at him. "Irish dog, indeed, who taught thee, dog of Jomsburg, to talk of dogs? I tell thee my father was a king in Ireland," and as he said this he laid hold of the wounded man by the hair at the back of his head, dragged it back, and in a second his sharp knife cut the tight-stretched throat from ear to ear.

"King in Ireland!" mockingly said another sorely wounded; "so far as I know, all thralls have kings to their fathers in Ireland. More than twenty such have I had, and they were all kings' sons, and so I think every man in Ireland must be a king or a king's son. Here, I can't rise, come quick to me and let me see how soon a king's son in Ireland can cut an honest Viking's throat."

At him, too, the bloodthirsty thrall flew, making as short work of him as he desired. In a little while all the badly wounded were despatched by him and his fellow thralls, and the rest stood up in a long row—the old likeness

to horses tied together by the tail at a fair still suiting them.

"Can you all walk?" asked Kark. "For this path that you are about to tread is a very slippery one, and if any man stumbles and falls" —as he said this he clutched his knife-hilt with terrible meaning—

"Don't talk so much, thrall," said old Beorn, who, with Vagn, was bound in about the middle of the string. "Don't talk so much, but do thy duty. Never fear that we shall not walk on without a trip on the last walk we are to take in Norway. By the way, your Earl Hacon is well called 'the Barn Earl.' I see it all now; it is because he keeps his prisoners in a barn."

At this Kark scowled; but the Vikings all laughed at this sally of the old Welshman, who thus kept up their spirits and his own in their direst need.

"Make haste, now," said Kark, as the laughter slackened.

"Yonder sits the Earl on that log, and his chiefs round him; and yonder stands Thorkell of Leira, with his sword aloft."

"Thorkell of Leira!" said Vagn. "Then, after all, we shall meet face to face, and I may fulfil my vow."

"Mark you, boy," whispered Beorn to his foster-child. "He says the Earl sits on that log. Bear in mind your dream, or rather what I call your 'second sight.'"

"On with you," shouted Kark from behind. "On with you all, and don't keep Earl Hacon the Mighty waiting."

As he said this, the dark thrall drove them towards the fair green sward, in the midst of which Bui's ship had been hauled, and round which a host of men were hard at work.

As the band of Vikings, now lessened to sixty, were seen approaching, the Norwegians ceased working, and all gazed at the poor remnant that was left of that mighty company.

"Here they come," cried the Earl; "and Erlend will soon have his companions to Valhalla. That is if any of these robbers are bold enough to be his fellows. Is it not said, Sigmund, that these Jomsvikings are men of such hardihood, that no fear ever makes them flinch?"

"So the story runs, lord," said the gallant Fareyinger. "And yesterday methought they bore themselves like men."

"True enough," said the Earl; "but that is not what I meant. In the heat of battle when the blood is up few men are cowards; but it is quite another thing when a man must die, as these men, in cold blood when the glow of battle has passed out of them, as heat out of iron."

"We have them on the hip, lord," replied Sigmund; "and if they die like men with no taunts from us, it were well."

"Sigmund, Brestir's son," said the Earl fiercely, "since when hast thou become a ruler in Norway? Know that it is ours to settle what we will do with these men who came hither to sack and spoil our land, and to overthrow us and our house. Their lives are forfeit to us and the State, and we will dispose of them as seems good to us without asking thy leave."

At these words Sigmund bowed his head, but Eric, the chivalrous Eric, had caught his father's words, and broke in with—

"Nay, but father!"

Even him, though he loved him much, the Earl would not suffer to intercede.

"'Nay' me no nays; and 'but' me no buts, Eric. We say it again,—we will send these Vikings out of the world in what ever way we please. Yes,—even with gibes and jeers, and mocking and torture, if we please."

By this time the long line of Vikings bound by cords to one long rope, stood before the Earl as he sat on the log.

Even then Vagn nudged Beorn, and whispered—"'Tis he, the dark handsome ruler whom I saw in my dream."

As Earl Hacon glared at them in his anger, no trace of pity lingered on his comely face. His blood was up, and he was bent on sacrifice rather than mercy. As he scanned their stalwart limbs and fair faces, all battle-soiled as they were, he exulted at the prospect of speedily sending such a batch of proper men, as the attendants of his lost son, to Odin's hall.

Bowing to them in scorn, he said—

"Welcome to Norwegian soil, Vikings of Jomsburg. Tell me whither hath your captain, the valiant Earl Sigvald, departed; and what

has become of his vow to turn me out of my realm, or to die in the attempt."

The Vikings gazed at him in return with eyes as full of scorn and defiance as his, but not a voice was raised in answer to his mocking words.

"Dumb as well as fettered, tongue-tied as well as hand-tied," the Earl went on. "Your tongues wagged fast at Strut-Harold's funeral ale when the ale was in, and your proud vows rushed out. Tell me what man among you has kept his vow, or means to keep it?"

To this taunting speech, as to the one which went before it, no answer was returned. Mute as fish the sixty Vikings stood staring at the Earl.

"Well!" said the Earl, "I ween the wish for words went out of you with those vows. You have now to learn what such rash vows lead to. Your lives are justly forfeit to our laws here in Norway. And, if the law did not condemn you, it is my right to slay Vikings taken red-handed, who have had the hardihood to invade my realm. But one thing now remains for you all, and that is to die. No doubt

such mighty champions as ye all are, the very flower of the Vikings of Jomsburg, will set the North an everlasting example how to die with hardihood."

Then, turning to Thorkell, he said—

"We keep you too long waiting, Thorkell of Leira. Naught now remains but to behead these robbers as speedily as you can."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEHEADING OF THE FIRST BATCH.

So now the fatal moment had come when the first Viking was to abide the bitter sword of Thorkell. The only mercy shown them was that it fell first on the sorely wounded, who were thus put out of their pain.

Up and down the line went Kark and his companion thralls, picking out a man here and a man there who could scarce stand on his feet for weakness and loss of blood.

As the reader knows, in that age long hair was specially the mark of the free-born man, and all the Vikings wore long flowing locks; but long hair, however much it set off a freeman in daily life, was sadly in the way when he had the mishap to be beheaded, for it hung down at the nape of his neck, and dulled and turned the edge of the axe or sword.

As each Viking, therefore, was loosed from

the rope to which he was bound by cords with his hands behind him, Kark, or one of the thralls, twisted a wand into his hair, and held it over his head on one side until the axe fell.

"Now begin, Thorkell," cried the Earl savagely. "We don't reckon these three or four wretches, who are half dead, anything. No man need blench at beheading half a dozen such."

The sturdy liegeman steadied himself on his feet, keeping them well apart; and, measuring the space between him and his victim, raised his long sword aloft; then with one sweeping sidelong stroke, smote the Viking on the neck, and off rolled the head on the green sward.

Another wounded man and another were led up and beheaded in the same way, and with the same skill; and Thorkell, proud of his handiwork, called out to the Earl, and asked—

"Have I blenched at all, lord?—for you know you said you had heard no man could behead three men running without blenching."

"Don't boast, Thorkell," cried the Earl, "till your work be done. Thou hast not yet blenched;

but something tells that thou wilt blench before the day is over. Go on fast, and make quick work. Nor shall we take it ill if thou tauntest them a little."

And now the fourth Viking was loosed from the rope, and again the wand was twisted in his hair, and he was led up to where Thorkell stood. He, too, was sore wounded, but his face, though pale, was full of daring and spirit.

As he stood by Thorkell, the liegeman leant on his sword, all gory as it was, and said—

"Now I am about to fall on thee, and slay thee. This is the last time thy hair will be dressed. Tell me what thinkest thou of this thy death?"

The Viking smiled, and said—

"What think I of my death? I think it good to die. I must make up my mind to die once for all like my father before me. Hew away."

At this, up went Thorkell's sword; and his head, too, spun off and rolled along the green sward, and his life, too, was ended.

And now the fifth man is loosed from the

rope and led up; and, as he came before Thorkell, the liegeman said—

"What thinkest thou of dying?"

"There is no thinking about it," said the Viking; "for I bear ever in mind that law of the Vikings of Jomsburg, which forbids me to repine at death, or to utter one craven word. Die! Why a man can but die once."

So Thorkell beheaded him, too.

Then the Earl said—

"Mind and ask them all the same question, Thorkell, before they are slain; and then we shall try this band whether it be every man of it so bold as is said. For, if none of them utters a craven word, we shall find if it be really so."

Then the sixth Viking was led up, and when the wand was twisted in his hair, Thorkell asked him the same question, and got a speedy answer—

"I think it good," said the man, "to die with good repute; but as for thee, Thorkell, thou wilt live on with shame."

Of him Thorkell made short work, and his head rolled on the sward.

And now the seventh man is led up, and Thorkell asked the same question after his wont.

"I think it very good to die," said the man, "and mind you behead me clean off at once. And now look here at this little knife which I hold in my hand. We Jomsvikings have often wondered in our talk whether a man knows aught, or feels aught, when his head flies off, if he is beheaded in a trice, at one clean stroke. And now this shall be a sign to you—that I will make a point with this knife if I know anything, if I do not it will fall down at once."

"Anything to please you," said Thorkell, as his sword whistled through the air.

Off flew the head, but the knife fell straight down to the earth: so that question was settled.

Then the eighth man was led up; and, when Thorkell asked him after his wont, he said he thought it very good to die; and, just as he thought the stroke was coming on him from behind, he called out "Ram."

Then Thorkell stayed his stroke, and asked him why that word came just then out of his mouth.

"Oh!" said the Viking, "I thought a ram would not be out of place among the *Ohs* and *Ewes* and *Ba's*, which ye warriors of the Earl uttered in your pain all yesterday whenever ye got a wound."

"Vilest of men," cried Thorkell, in wrath; and down came the stroke on him with a swoop, while all the Vikings laughed at their comrade's joke.

Then came the ninth man; and, when Thorkell asked him his question, he said—

"I think my death right and good, just as all of us comrades think it; but now I will not let myself be slaughtered like a sheep. I had rather sit facing you, and you deal your stroke in front on my brow; and look sharp and see if I blench or flinch from the blow; for we Jomsvikings have often talked about that."

And so it was done,—he sat face to face with Thorkell, and Thorkell went up to him in front, and dealt him his death blow on the brow, and he never flinched or made any sign save that his eyes closed when death came on him.

Now the tenth man was led up, and Thorkell asked him the same question.

"Bide a bit," the man said, "till I pull up my breeks."

"Pull them up, I'll bide thy time," said Thorkell.

And when he had pulled them up, the man said—

"Well now, see how strangely things happen. Many things turn out quite otherwise than men think. I thought to kill Earl Hacon and have his wife, Thora Skagi's daughter, for my bedfellow; and yet, here I am, with my hands bound behind me, and yonder sits the Earl on that log. But as for dying I don't think it worth thinking of."

"Off with his head as soon as ever thou canst," cried out the Earl. "This fellow must have ever meant us mischief."

So Thorkell beheaded him without more ado.

Then was led up a young man whose hair was thick in flowing locks, as yellow as silk.

"What thinkest thou of dying?" asked Thorkell.

"I have lived out the fairest part of my life," said the young Viking; "for those have died a little while ago, after whom I do not think it

worth to live. But now I will not that thralls should lead me to death, but rather a man, no less noble than thou art; and he must be quick and handy too, and hold my hair up away from my head, and pull the head forward so that my hair does not get bloody."

Yes! that boon he should have, so one of the Earl's body-guard stepped up and took up his yellow hair and wound it round his arm; while Thorkell brandished his sword and meant to grant him his heart's desire, and to behead him there and then at one stroke.

So the sword flashed and the stroke fell; but that young man, when he heard the whistling of the sword, bowed his head suddenly and sharply, so that the stroke fell on him who held his hair; and so Thorkell struck off both the arms of the Earl's man at the elbow.

Then the young Viking sprang up and turned the whole matter into mirth and bawled out—

"Which of you lads, I wonder, has his hands caught in my hair."

Up then leapt Earl Hacon from his log, and said—

"Great ill-luck hath now befallen us from these men, and more will befall us, if we do not take care, from those who are still left on the rope; so take and kill them as quickly as you can, and as for this fellow—kill him first and all the rest after him; for these men are much more bold and daring and hard to deal with than we weened, and no over-wrought stories are these that are told of their hardihood and courage."

But now the gallant Eric threw himself into the way of his father's wrath and said—

"Not so, father. They must not be slain thus; for we must first know the names of these men, and what they are, before we kill them."

Then turning to the young Viking he asked—

"And thy name, what is it?"

"My name is Sweyn," said he.

"Whose son art thou? or what is thy kindred?"

"Bui the Stout is called my father, and he was the son of Veseti, of Bornholm, and on my mother's side I am Danish."

"How old art thou?" said Eric.

"If I live over this winter," he answered, "I shall be eighteen years old."

"And thou shalt overlive this winter," said Eric, "if I have any power, and thou shalt not be slain. Come now with me."

So Eric took Sweyn the Viking into his peace, and made him stand along with him and his body-guard while the beheading of the rest went on.

CHAPTER XV.

VAGN FULFILS HIS VOW.

It must not be imagined that this proceeding of Eric's was looked on by Earl Hacon with any satisfaction. Far from it: while Eric took Sweyn by the hand and led him off to the knot of men who stood round the young Earl and formed his body-guard, his father looked moodily on, but for a while said never a word. At last he strode up to his son, and said—

"I do not understand, Eric, what you mean by this, when you seek to beg off the life of this man, who has wrought us such shame and scathe. As for this lad, all I know is, that he has done us all the harm he could, and you have thrown your shield over him. But for all that, I can never try to take him out of your hands by main force, and so you must have your way this once."

"I threw my shield over him, father," said

Eric, "because he is so young, and I thought there was the making of a man in him."

"The unmaking of many a man in him, rather," said the Earl, as he turned short away.

Then he went up to Thorkell of Leira, and said—

"Set to work with all thy heart, Thorkell. Don't lose any more time, but off with the heads of the rest of them as fast as thou canst."

But as soon as Eric heard that, he crossed over at once to his father, and said—

"Not so, father, not so. Not one of them shall lose his head till I have had speech with each of them; for I wish to know whom we are beheading before they die."

"'Shall,' and 'I,' Eric," cried the Earl, "these are haughty words to use to your father and your lord."

"Haughty or not, father," said Eric, "they are as much to your honour as to my own. Whoever heard of slaughtering mighty men, as some of these Vikings are, like cattle all in a heap, without even knowing their names."

"Well, let them not die nameless," said the Earl; "but with or without names, let them die at once, and let their bones be mingled in the dust with his;" and as he said this, he pointed to Erlend's half-heaped cairn.

"Now," cried Thorkell, who was as blood-thirsty as when he began his horrid work, "who comes next? Let us hear his name and title before I make him shorter by a head."

So the next man was loosed from the rope, and as he stepped away from it, it dropped and got caught a little in his feet.

"This man is tall of growth and fair of face, young too, and altogether one of the bravest looking and briskest of men," said Eric to one of the Icelanders who stood with him.

"One of their captains, no doubt," said his companion; "but hark! Thorkell asks him his name; we shall soon hear it, and his kith and kin."

Then Thorkell put to him the old question—

"What thinkest thou of dying?"

"Good, I should think it, could I only first fulfil my vow."

Thorkell was just about to behead him

without another word, when Eric broke in and said—

"What is thy name? and what was that thy vow which thy heart is so set on fulfilling before thou losest thy life?"

"My name is Vagn," was the answer, "and I am the son of Aki, the son of Palnatoki, of Fünen, at least so they tell me."

At this renowned name, which, side by side with that of Bui, was famous throughout the North as the boldest champion in all the Viking band, there was a buzz of voices among the chiefs who stood round; all wondered at the strength and stature and noble bearing of the man of whom such stories of his hardihood and daring ran. After a pause, Eric went on—

"And what, Vagn, might be the vow which you swore to fulfil, about which you just now said you thought it good to die if you could only fulfil it before you lost your life?"

"My vow," said Vagn, "was this: I vowed to wed Ingibeorg, the daughter of Thorkell of Leira, without his leave, or that of the rest of her kin, and to slay him with my own hand if I came to Norway. And now it cuts me to

the heart to fall so short of my word, that I shall not be able to fulfil my vow before I die."

At these bold words, Thorkell, who now for the first time saw his enemy before him face to face, flew at him, exclaiming—

"I will take good care that thou shalt not fulfil it before thou diest."

As he uttered these words, he grasped his sword with both hands, and smote at him.

But Beorn, the Welshman, as he saw the stroke coming, and stood next to his foster-child on the rope, spurned Vagn with one foot and hurled him down away from the sword; but Thorkell smote the air, and the point of the sword as it passed over Vagn's back cut the cords which bound his hands behind his back. So there was Vagn a free man, so far as bonds went, and without a scratch.

As for Thorkell, he had so thrown himself into the stroke, that he fell forward with it flat on the ground; and as he fell, away flew the sword out of his grasp, and lighted at Vagn's side, for the force of the kick which Beorn gave

his foster-child was such, that Vagn had also fallen to the earth.

All this passed in a moment of time, and before men could utter a word or even draw a long breath Vagn was up on his feet. He only lay long enough to clutch the sword thus thrown in his way; and, springing up, he dealt Thorkell of Leira his death-blow with his own sword, and as he smote off his head, called out—

"Now have I, Vagn, Aki's son, fulfilled one of my vows; and I feel all the better for fulfilling it already."

The whole was so sudden—Thorkell's idle stroke in the air, his fall and that of Vagn, and then his death by his own sword—that no one could lift a hand, much less utter a word. It was all done and over in a second as it seemed.

The first of all the beholders to recover himself was old Beorn, who, as Vagn full of life and beauty stood by him, said—

"Well kicked, was it not, foster-child? Go on like that, and thou wilt fulfil the other half of thy vow."

The next was Earl Hacon, who, with flashing eyes, called out—

"Don't let him any longer run about loose, but slay him out of hand, for he has done us the greatest scathe."

But here the gallant Eric again threw himself in the way of his father's wrath.

"He shall not be slain, father," he said, "before I myself am slain. I now beg Vagn's life at thy hand; and if thou wilt not grant me my boon, I will defend him with my sword. A man who can do such brave deeds is worth living and worth dying for."

The Earl looked hard at his son, as if musing in his mind whether he should resist him by force; but his fury seemed to pass off, and at last he said—

"I see there is no use our having any share in this matter, kinsman, for you wish to settle it all alone, and I can't fight it out with you."

"We make a good bargain in sparing Vagn's life, father," said Eric, "and methinks it is making a very good change, if we take him into those honours and dignities which Thorkell yonder just now had."

"Thorkell was a good and faithful liege-

man," said the Earl, "but Vagn and his fellows have been our bitter foes."

"As for Thorkell, father," said Eric, "this that has befallen him was not unlooked for; for now has proved true what has been often said before, that a wise man has the gift of second sight; for you yourself with your own eyes saw that he was 'fey' this morning, and you told him so. Death was already coming on him, and now it has come."

Then he turned to Vagn, and said—

"I take thee, Vagn, into my peace, and now there is no risk that thou shalt lose thy life this time."

"Stay!" said Vagn, "not so fast, young Earl! the only thing that will make me think it better to take my life of thee than to die here on the spot, where so many have already died, is this:—I will not live unless peace is granted to all of my comrades who are left alive; otherwise we will all of us tread the same path together, like true brothers-in-arms."

"Proud indeed are ye Vikings of Jomsburg," cried Eric; "I do not say that I will grant what thou askest; but wait till I come to

speech with these comrades of thine to whom thou clingest so closely."

"Grant it or not, Earl," said Vagn coldly, "I shall abide by what I have said; brothers in life we Vikings have been, and brothers we are all of us bound to be in death. That is what Vagn, the son of Aki, thinks."

As he said this, Eric left his men and went along the file of men still bound to the long rope, and the first man he came to was Beorn, the Welshman, who, as we know, was bound next to his foster-child.

"What manner of man art thou, Viking?" asked the young Earl, "and what is thy name?"

"My name is Beorn, if you must know it," growled out the old Viking.

"Art thou that Beorn," said Eric, "who was boldest in seeking the man who was left behind in King Sweyn's hall?"

"I know not," answered Beorn, "if I were the best at seeking for him. All I know is, I went in and brought the man out."

"And what quarrel, I should like to know," asked Eric, "hadst thou, an old man, against

us, to bring thee hither? What drove thee to this voyage, a bald pate, and with beard as white as wool or winter's snow? True it is that every straw in our beds should prick us men of Norway on to battle when we see you all coming to fight against us, one and all, and even old men like thee, whose fighting days ought to be over for age sake."

"I came," said Beorn, "because I am still strong, and because, as one of the band, I was bound to come. I care not whether every straw in your beds pricks you Norwegians. As for me, for years and years I never slept in a straw bed, and I hope never to die a straw death. Do with me as you will: I can but die once."

"Wilt thou ask thy life of me, Beorn?" said Eric, "for I think so old a man should be past killing."

"Kill me or not, as you please," repeated Beorn.

"Wilt thou ask thy life? I say it again," said Eric.

"Well!" said Beorn, "I don't think it such a great boon. You say I am past killing: I say I am past living. There is only one thing

now that would make me ask my life; and that is, if my foster-child, Vagn, and all of our men that are left, may have peace as well."

"Spoken like a good man and true, Beorn," said Eric. "Peace shall be granted to you all, if I may have my way; and now stand all of you there on the rope, while I go and speak to my father."

So Eric went up to his father, who had turned his thoughts from the slaughter of the prisoners and was busy directing the earth-works round Erlend's cairn.

"It rises high, Eric," he said: "he will soon be so laid in earth as few kings or chiefs have been buried in Norway."

"Yes, father, it will be a noble cairn; but tell me, father, how many of these Vikings think you have perished by sword and water since yester morn?"

"Who can reckon them, Eric!" said his father, proudly. "You can tell as well as I. They came against us with one hundred and fifty tall ships in brave trim and full manned; we met them with three hundred, and but twenty-four of them were counted by the

watchmen at the Narrows, as they fled out of the Voe. The rest are either ours, or sunk beneath the waves."

"And, father," Eric went on, "how many men think you have perished of the foe?"

"Why, all, save those that fled and those few on the rope yonder,—it may be forty."

"Then, father," asked Eric, "do you not think that Erlend, whom we all loved, and who died so bravely, had men enough at his back to enter Valhalla last night with a greater and nobler following than any earl or king that Norway has ever known?"

"True, Eric," said the Earl, "the lad has a noble company. Odin will see that he was a mighty prince when so many slain foemen throng the hall behind him."

"Then, father," said Eric, "forgive me if I have angered you this day, for it was all done for your glory; but grant me one boon more, the lives of this wretched remnant of the Vikings that are left. Erlend's glory will be no greater if they are slain, but yours will be less."

"How less?" said the stern Earl, struck by his words.

"Less, father, because it is glorious for a great prince, the lord of a noble land, to spare his foes when vengeance has been fully wreaked. Spare these men; and then so long as this story of the battle in Hjoringsvoe lives, —and be sure it will live for ever,—all the North will say there never was such a ruler in Norway as Earl Hacon, the Barn Earl, for might and mercy; for he utterly routed the Vikings of Jomsburg, and after the bloody fight was over had mercy on his prisoners."

"Go away and leave me, Eric," said the Earl, "and have your way; but let not these Vikings come before my sight, lest I should break my word and have them slain. Go! their lives are granted. You have won the day."

CHAPTER XVI.

VAGN AND THE VIKINGS ARE TAKEN INTO THE EARL'S PEACE.

THE young Earl lost no time in hastening back to the long line of men on the rope; and, taking Sweyn and Vagn with him whom he had already taken into his peace, he said—

"Ye Vikings of Jomsburg—and you before all the rest, Vagn, Beorn, and Sweyn,—know that I have pleaded your cause with my father, and though he looks on your lives as forfeited, he has given them to me."

Here Vagn broke in and said, "If we take them it must be on one condition—it must be one and all. If it be only one, or two, or three, and those the chief of us, it must be none."

"It shall be one and all," said Eric; "and now ye are my men, if you will ask your lives of me.

"One and all we ask it then," said Vagn.

"Your lives are granted, noble Vagn," said Eric, "and in due time you shall be taken solemnly into the Earl's peace. Meantime I pledge my word that not a hair of your heads shall be harmed. Join yourselves to my men, and bear arms among my body-guard."

"I take no service," cried Vagn, "though for the sake of these I ask my life."

"Nor I," said Beorn. "I have always been my own master since I was that high, and I am too old to begin to serve a new master now."

"You must be with my body-guard, though not of them. You join my men, but you do not come into my hand," said Eric. "As for your lives, you have given them as free men to me, and to you as free men I give them back."

"Spoken like a prince," said Vagn.

"So be it," said Eric; "on those terms, then, you join my body-guard."

"Now it is settled, noble Eric," said Beorn, "bid them loose us from this rope; and though I can bear it much longer, just be good enough

to let some one cut the cord that ties my hands behind my back; for, by the feeling, it is cutting into my flesh."

"Here, you thrall! you Kark Scowlface!" cried Eric, "bring thy knife hither and cut these cords."

Slowly and sullenly the dark thrall came up, and drawing his knife out of his belt, said—

"Strange things happen now-a-days in Norway."

"How so?" said Eric.

"Why, here is the old Earl all eager to send Erlend out of the world with a goodly company, and all things look cheerful and pleasant. The blood with which the Gods of this country were to be gladdened—out in Ireland we were Christians—was ready for shedding, and this knife had already tasted some, till Thorkell's sword licked up the rest; when, lo! just as we were all merry, the heads that danced away after each sword stroke stopped their capers, and Thorkell himself bites the dust—a very good thing, I say, for I like every drop of blood; and then all the beheading comes to an end. We are all dull, and have to pile earth over

Erlend, instead of more and more bodies; and all for what? to spare the lives of our bitter enemies, whom it has pleased our young Earl to take into his peace; but for all that I say thank God the old Earl still lives, yet awhile at least."

"Spoiled thrall! Spoiled by my father's favour," cried Eric. "No more words; but cut the cords that bind these men's hands behind their backs, and then loose them from the rope and set them free."

"Set them free!" cried Kark. "And when I set them free, who is to say whether one of them will not snatch my knife out of my hand and make an end of poor me, like Thorkell?"

"Loose them, and set them free, I say," said Eric. "As for thy life, what matters it whether it be taken now or not?"

"Not to you, Earl Eric, perhaps, but to me," said the thrall. Then he added, in a lower voice, "and to the old Earl. No one knows what I know," he muttered; "no one hears or sees so many things as I know. I know what the freemen say, when the old Earl robs them of their wives and daughters; and what even

his liegemen say, when he presses them for his dues. They say the King's ears are long, but longer still are his thrall's. After all, it may be his blood that I see so often red upon my knife—as I see it now, though to others it looks bright and clean."

As he stood there, thus muttering to himself, old Beorn shrugged his shoulders, and cast such an imploring look on Eric, that he strode up and spurned the thrall with his foot, and said—

"Don't stand muttering there, and glaring at the knife; but use it, and cut the cords."

"Pardon, noble Eric," said the thrall, with mock humility:—"I forgive you for mistaking me for a dog; but sometimes I am full of thought for the good of my lord Hacon and his house, and then I take small heed of orders, even though followed by kicks. Dogs and thralls get kicks and cuffs: so it has been, and so it will be. 'Tis the way of the world; and now tell me what it is you wish me to do."

"Twice I have already told thee," said Eric. "A third time I say cut the cords that bind the captives' arms."

"All good things are three," said the thrall. "And now to set the cage-birds free."

As he said this, he passed swiftly along the line, and, as he reached each man, cut the cord. Their hands thus set free, they were all loosed from the rope, and thus at last were neither bound hand or foot.

The first use which old Beorn made of his liberty was to run up to Vagn and clasp him in his arms.

"Free after all, foster-child, and half your vow fulfilled! Who ever would have thought it, a short hour ago?"

"Wonderful, indeed," said Vagn. "May the last half of my vow be as well fulfilled."

"May!" cried Beorn, "may! Cease your 'maying.' It is sure to be fulfilled. Fair Ingibeorg, as you call her, will be yours."

"Was ever maiden known to wed the man who slew her father?" asked Vagn.

"How do I know?" said Beorn, "who am no maiden. Ask them; I'll be bound many have done the like."

"I trow not," said Vagn.

"Let this, then, be the first maiden to do it,

and set the example. All things happen in war."

Here Eric broke in upon the talk of the two.

"Noble Vagn," he said, "though you have broken your fast already this day, it was on such sorry fare that you may well all be hungry. Come to my tent, and eat and drink. For this day, keep out of my father's sight, for he is still full of the rage of battle, and dangerous for a foeman to meet."

With these words, he led them to his booths —temporary shanties run up to shelter himself and his men. There the frozen bodies of the Vikings were bathed and rubbed by Eric's thralls. Those who were wounded—and there was scarce one of them that was without a hurt —were looked to carefully by the leeches, and their wounds bound up. After that they sat down before the welcome blaze of long fires lighted down the length of the booths, and ate and drank. That they were merry, after escaping such risk, and after sustaining such a signal defeat, cannot be said; but there was a sense of relief and thankfulness and rest, as of men

suddenly thrown on land after weary buffetting with a stormy sea.

After they had eaten and drunk their fill, they each sank down to slumber as they sat; and soon the booths were filled with no sound save that of the heavy breathing of the Vikings, whom the generosity of the gallant Eric had rescued from destruction.

While they ate and drank and slept out the rest of that eventful day, Earl Hacon consoled his baulked revenge by busying himself with Erlend's burial.

As soon as the beheadings ceased, the host of men set to work with renewed strength, and the mound of earth was soon all round as high as the rail which ran round the lofty poop of Bui's ship. There, close to the helm, lay the comely corse, still and solemn, on its green bier, and there Earl Hacon now took his stand.

Looking down from the poop into the waist of the ship, the eye met a yawning gulf, round which the earth was piled high on all sides.

"Sigmund, son of Brestir," said the Earl, with a husky voice, "we have been baulked of some of our victims; but enough have already

bit the dust under Thorkell's sword to make our son a goodly body-guard. Bid Kark and his fellow thralls bear the bodies of the Vikings that lie yonder on the green sward up the sides of the mound, and hurl them down abaft the mast into the ship's waist."

This was a task which well suited Kark's gloomy temper.

"Up with them, my lads," he cried to his underlings, "up with these idle lumps of clay. See how yon hand hangs down like lead. Only yesterday it could launch a shaft or wield a sword, and now it cannot lift so much as a little finger to touch me when I kick it."

As he said this, he spurned the stark corpse of a Viking with his foot as it lay on the brink of the mound, and down it shot into the gulf several feet below.

"He was eager to board our ships, and leapt out of his own into the forecastle when the fight was hot. See how he boards one of his own ships, a lifeless, headless lump. But I forgot, they must not lie down there in the waist without their heads, else how would they know Odin, or Odin them, when they stride

headless into Valhalla. Run and fetch all the heads that spun off so merrily, and let us set them all of a row, and roll them down after their bodies; and then, when they wake up to-night, let them take care to snatch up their right heads. Who cares even if they fall to loggerheads about them? I am sure I do not."

With such ghastly mocking, Kark and his fellows discharged their hideous duty. It was no part of the customs of the North to insult the remains of an enemy when dead; but thralls are ill ministers of reverence and respect. While Earl Hacon, and Sigmund and Einar Scaleclang, were busy over the body of his son, his menials and slaves thus wreaked a sorry vengeance on the dead for the trouble they had to bestow on them.

At last all the Vikings who had been beheaded were thus tossed into the waist of the ship; and Kark, with a very different countenance, came before the Earl to take his pleasure.

"What is it, Kark?" he asked. "Are the bodies of the Vikings all laid in the waist below?"

"They are, lord," said the thrall. "It is not about them, but about another, that I wish to know your pleasure."

"Another?" said the Earl, as if in a dream. "What other?"

"Yonder lies Thorkell of Leira," said Kark, with something very like a sardonic grin. "We have looked to all the beheaded, and there their bodies and their heads too are safely laid; but what of the headsman who swept them off so deftly—what are we to do with him?"

"Let him lie with those whom he sent out of the world," said the Earl; "or, stay, lay him on a bier, and let him lie side by side with Erlend. Hand in hand our son shall enter Valhalla with one of our chief liegemen."

With an inward curse at this new duty imposed on him, Kark departed with his companions, and soon laid the liegeman of Leira on a bier like that on which Erlend rested.

"He at least has got his own head with him," said Kark to his friends; "he cannot miss finding that; but for all that, he lost it while he was alive. Had he but been handier with his sword, as a headsman ought to be, off would

have spun Vagn's head; Vagn would not have been taken into the young Earl's peace; and then all the rest of these Vikings would have followed their leader, and our tale of victims would have been complete."

When Thorkell's body had been borne on to the poop, all was ready for the last funeral rites. In the mean time the mound of earth had been growing fast, and it already overshadowed the poop; while as for the waist of the ship, and the Vikings who lay down there still in death, it and the dead looked as though sunk deep down below ground.

"Sigmund Brestir's son," said the Earl to the Fareyinger, "bring hither the Hellshoon, and let me bind them on Erlend's feet. Whosoever treads the path of Hell must be well shod, or he will be footsore when he comes to Valhalla."

In a little while, Sigmund returned with two pairs of stout shoes.

"Behold the Hellshoon, lord," he said: "one pair for Erlend and one for Thorkell."

"Bind one on Thorkell," said the Earl. "He has no next of kin, and to me it belongs

to name the man who shall bind them on tight, or they may chance to slip off on Hell's rough way."

So Sigmund took the pair and carefully bound one shoe to each of Thorkell's feet, while the Earl performed the same duty by Erlend.

When they were both fast bound and laced up over the ankles, the Earl rose and called out—

"I know not how to bind Hellshoon on if these ever loosen."

Then, after a pause, he said to the workmen, who still toiled unflinchingly at the mound, for which they used large heaps of gravel and sand won from the shore of the Voe—

"Now, good men, who have helped to raise Erlend's cairn, heap stones heavily on him and them who now rest in this ship."

As he said this, both he and Sigmund sprang up out of the ship on to the loose heap; and, scrambling up, gave over the ship and the biers to the workmen, who shot barrowful after barrowful of grit and stones and sand and gravel on the poop and down into the waist.

It was not long before what had been, twenty-

four hours before, Bui's ship—one of the proudest in the Viking fleet,—was quite hidden under a huge mass of earth. Then the workmen, ever showering in fresh gravel, leapt down on the earth above the poop, and trode it firmly down both there and over the waist, till the whole ship—the mast having been unstepped took the form of an oblong barrow. Over all, on the crown of the cairn, they piled a heap of great stones and boulders from the shore.

When this was done the Earl and Sigmund and Einar Scaleclang returned to the spot and looked down on the green sward sloping down to the Voe, on which now stood a stately cairn, where naught just before existed but a smooth mead.

"How soon a ship turns into a cairn, Sigmund!" said the Earl.

"Truth, lord," said the ready Fareyinger; "but rather say how soon a mighty host is turned into a crowd of runagates and vagabonds when they are met by the wisdom and valour of a mighty chief who, strong in the favour of the ancient Gods and in the bravery of his people, knows how to baffle and defeat the most

dangerous enemy that ever set foot in Norway."

"The day begins to fall, Sigmund," said the Earl. "Let us up to the Grange and eat and drink and sleep. We have scarce taken rest these many nights for fear of what was coming on us and the land. That fear has now vanished like the sham Earl Sigvald, and we may take the rest we all need."

So the Earl and his sons—all save Eric, who that night kept aloof from his father—ate and drank and slept that night. What happened next day must be told in another chapter.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VIKINGS PARDONED.

If the day after the battle had been one of triumph, mixed with mourning and slaughter, the second was given up to joy and mirth. Early in the morning Earl Hacon rose; and, side by side with his sons, and followed by his chiefs and liegemen, and a great company of the free-men who still formed the strength of Norway, went down to the green sward, no longer dabbled with blood and strewn with corpses. Then he ordered the huge bear-skin to be brought, into the ample folds of which the silver, which the Viking spoil had fetched, had been poured, after which the four paws and the head and tail had been sewn up till Bruin's hide took the shape of a big bag.

As it was borne down to the shore it was a load for six stalwart men: as they staggered

under the burden the Earl laughed loud and said—

"They say Bruin has the strength of twelve men when he is alive, and I daresay it is true, for see it takes six men to bear his hide alone."

"True, father," said Sweyn—the good fighter but the dullard; "but then you see this hide has something in it."

At this the Earl—for this was one of his good and merry days, when no dark cloud passed across his brow—only laughed the more at Sweyn's wise speech; and, when the fit was over, found breath to say—

"Rip open the purse and let us share the spoil by weight. Einar Scaleclang, we shall need thy scales for business, not for divination, out with them!" Then, as if remembering himself, he said—

"I forgot, thine are gold scales, and the spoil is silver which will be weighed by the pound and not by the ounce or grain: we shall not need thy scales, Einar."

Then a huge pair of copper scales was brought, in which the price of the spoil was

duly weighed, amounting in all to about a thousand pounds weight of pure silver.

After the weight was known, the sharing was made there and then on the green grass. Of this the Earl's share, as lord of the land, was one-tenth: another tenth he claimed as High Priest of the Gods, as a thank-offering to the Powers who had so wonderfully helped Norway in her hour of need. That left eight hundred pounds to be shared among the chiefs and the freemen. As for the King's liegemen they were entitled to a share of the spoil, such as his bounty might allot them; and for this another hundred pounds was set aside for the Earl. A fourth hundred was shared among the ten great chiefs who had shared in the battle, the heirs of those who like Arnmod and others had fallen in the fight. The rest, amounting to six hundred pounds, was shared equally among all the free-born men who were alive to claim their portion.

In this way the huge pile of silver, which the bear-skin could scarce contain, speedily melted away; the Earl's three hundred pounds being piled up in three heaps at his feet. At last all the silver was gone, save those three heaps.

Then the Earl spoke and said, pointing to the first heap as he began—

"This first pile belongs to us, and shall go to swell our treasure in our strong house at the Barns. It will be the duty of Kark and the thralls, followed by our body-guard, to bear it thither. Meantime let it lie where it is on the grass, and let me see if any thief dares to touch what belongs to me."

Then he went on, pointing to the second heap—"This pile I devote to the Gods, and with it I will re-build and furnish that temple in Gudbrandsdale which that niddering Rapp burnt down and spoiled in the autumn. In it, as always, special devotion shall be paid to Thorgerda Shrinebride, by whom and her sister Irpa our host was so stoutly holpen in the battle. Let that pile also lie there, and let me see if we still have a niddering like Rapp among us, who will stretch out his hand to take what belongs to the Gods."

Then pointing to the third heap he went on—

"This pile we will share among our body-guard and our liegemen. Our liegemen, alas! are fewer than we hoped. Hallstein Carlinesbane

fell in the battle and five others with him: to them has now been added Thorkell of Leira. But five still remain, and to them we allot ten pounds each. That leaves fifty pounds to our body-guard of twenty-five men. They shall receive two pounds each, and it is enough, for they are always with us and are often sharers of our bounty."

Then after a pause he said—"And now that business is over; and so let us go to our morning meal."

It need hardly be said that this meal was jovial and uproarious. Earl Hacon, and his sons, and his men ate fiercely and drank deep; for this was the hour of feasting and rejoicing, after the enemy had been beaten, the dead buried, and the spoil shared.

For the rest it was like other feasts so often described. Every thing was of the best that could be had, and luckily the Grange at Hjoring was well known as a hospitable house. Its store of salted flesh and fresh meat lasted for the Earl's banquet, and its cellar was well stored with ale and mead. They might eat the owner out of house and home, but was not this

a time for mirth, when Norway had just won so glorious a victory.

But even victorious Northmen in the tenth century could not eat and drink all day. Besides there was the evening meal to come, and between it were several hours to be filled up.

When the mirth was at its highest, Earl Hacon rose and said—

"This is a day of mirth and joy; and, now that we have had a noble feast, it will not do to sit idle here over the fires till the hour for the evening meal steals upon us. Let us up, then, and be doing something; and what better thing can we do than have games and trials of strength on the smooth green sward down by the Voe?"

This proposal was hailed with a roar of applause which shook the timbers of the hall, and without more ado the whole company rose and streamed out of the Grange down to the shore.

If any one remembers Vagn and his companions, and asks where they were while this revelling was going on, the answer is that they were all safe in Earl Eric's booth, where he had provided for them an ample meal. There they sat safe and warm over the fires, resting their

weary limbs, and by Eric's advice keeping out of Earl Hacon's sight.

"This is another kind of wonder from that which I wondered in the barn, foster-child," said Beorn to Vagn. "Then it was a wonder of life and death, now it is only the wonderment of curiosity. But for all that I do wonder what these Norwegians are about now."

This the old Viking said as he heard the shouts of the uproarious revellers as they rushed out of the Grange and down to the shore.

"Mad pranks and noise become conquerors well, foster-father," said Vagn. "We should be just as loud and jovial had we won the day and fulfilled our vows."

"Vows again!" said Beorn testily, "and this from a man who beyond all hope has already fulfilled half of his, and is in a fair way to fulfil the rest."

"I wish I saw it," said Vagn; and then they spoke no more, but both sat idly gazing into the embers of the half-burnt logs.

As they sat, the shouts from the spot where the Norwegians were gathered grew louder and louder; and at last some one of the Vikings,

more curious than the two chiefs, rose and peeped at what was passing in the distance through one of the chinks of the rough boards out of which the booth was made.

In a little while he stole back and whispered something in Beorn's ear.

"Say you so," was all the answer. The Viking then returned to his seat; and after musing awhile old Beorn said, giving Vagn a push with his elbow—

"Foster-child! this is dull work, sitting staring into the fire. Hast thou a mind for a bold and lively bit of work?"

"How can we be bold and lively in this prison?" asked Vagn.

"Prison indeed!" said Beorn. "I call it no prison where there be no guards; we are free to walk in and out as we please."

"Are we?" said Vagn. "When you know Earl Eric bade us beware of coming under his father's eye. As yet we are not taken into his peace, but only into that of the young Earl."

"Very good. I know all that," said Beorn; "but I say, have you a mind to do a daring bit of work?"

"What is it?"

"Why, young Gudbrand yonder, he with the broad gash across his brow peeped out just now, and what think you he saw? Why, all these Norwegians staking out the ground with wands as if for races and wrestling. They will soon be hard at it; and what I say is, would it not be fine sport to go among them with hooded head, claim the Earl's peace as strangers, and then to take part in the games? Thus we should both be in the Earl's peace, and have good sport instead of kicking our heels over the fire all day."

"As you will," said Vagn. "How shall we set about it?"

"As warily as foxes," said the old Viking. "Thou seest, boy, this booth has two doors; and yonder lie two rough cloaks with hoods left by Eric's men. The sight of them was what first made me think of this. We will put them on, and steal out at the other door which lies close to the wood. Once out, we will make a round; and so come on the Norwegians quite away on the other side. Then they will think we are strangers wayfaring through the land, and

never dream we are the red Vikings whom they know are shut up here. Before we take part in the sports we will take pledges of the Earl in the old form, and then they—firm believers in the Gods—will never touch a hair of our heads."

"I like the scheme, foster-father," said Vagn. "It has some risk in it."

With Vagn, to will was to do. In a trice he and Beorn had muffled themselves in the wide cloaks; and, passing out at the other door, were lost in the depths of the forest. At first they went straight on away from the Voe; but, coming to a little hill, they climbed it, and took a survey of the landscape.

"Yonder away lies the Voe," said Vagn; "and I can just see the men at their sports. We have fared far enough in this direction. Now let us make a bend, and so come down on them."

To make a long story short, after some time the men who stood by Earl Hacon, as he sat again on a log beholding the sports, were ware of two tall forms, wrapped in rough cloaks, who issued from the fringe of wood, and made straight for the spot where the Earl sat.

"Who be these, I wonder?" said Sigmund. "Both are proper men," he added, as he scanned their stature, and saw that one of them at least matched his own.

"Wanderers and wayfarers through the land," said Sweyn; "that any one can see by the guise. No neighbour walks in Norway with hooded head."

As the men came near, Earl Hacon saw them too.

"Who be these?" he cried. "Tall fellows both. Had they been with us a day or two sooner, they might have yielded us some help. Ask them their names, Sigmund, and why they walk thus with hooded head?"

Sigmund did the Earl's bidding, and brought back the answer—

"Vegtamr and Gangleri are their names, lord," he said; "and they walk thus, because they are wayfarers, and do not wish to be known."

"Vegtamr and Gangleri," said the Earl; "these are two of Odin's names, and not those of living men. All strangers are Waytamers and Gangrels; but under any name they are welcome. Let them approach."

When the two tall cloaked forms—their heads hidden in hoods drawn deep down over their faces—stood before them, the Earl scanned them narrowly for a moment, and then said—

"Throw off your cloaks and draw up your hoods, if ye be good men and true. As ye are tall and proper, it might give us sport if you matched yourself with our men in running or wrestling!"

"We may not," said the shorter of the pair, "we may not throw off our cloaks and hoods till we are sure of your peace, lord; and till you have taken us into it with pledges."

"Pledges!" cried the Earl. "Do ye ask pledges of me?"

"Yes," said the taller of the two, "without formal pledges granted and accepted on either side, we cannot throw off our disguise."

"'Tis well for you both," said the Earl, "that I am in a good temper to-day, otherwise I might have set Sigmund here and my body-guard on your heels; but, as this is a high day and a holy day after our victory over these Vikings, we will take you into our peace in due form, and we will ourselves utter it."

"To these terms we agree," said the taller, "and now, lord Earl, recite the form."

The Earl then rose; and, with a solemn chanting voice, began as follows—

"This is the first word of our peace-telling, that, as we are all atoned before the Gods, so shall we be all of us atoned and reconciled, the one to the other, at meat and at drink, at market and meeting, at temple door and in Earl's hall, and whatever place else men meet together. We shall be so agreed as though there had never been any quarrel between us. We shall share knife and steak, and all things else between us, as friends and not foes. If strife arises henceforth between us, then fines shall be paid, but no blade reddened. But that man of us who breaks the peace now made, and slays after pledge given, he shall be driven away as a wolf, and chased so far as men chase wolves furthest, or as men worship in shrines, fires burn, earth brings forth seed, maid calls 'mother,' ships skim sea, shields shine, sunbeam melts snow, Finns glide on snowshoon, fir grows, hawk flies on summer day with fair wind under both his wings, heaven bends over,

earth is peopled, winds rise, waters flow to sea, and men sow corn. He shall be banished from Asgard and Midgard, and from every home save Hell. Each of us takes pledges from the other for himself and his heirs, begotten and unbegotten, named and unnamed, and each of us grants in his turn life pledges and lasting pledges, meet pledges and mighty pledges, which shall ever be kept, so long as earth lasts and men live upon it. Now are we atoned and agreed wherever we meet, on land or on lake, on ship or on skate, on sea and on steed—

> Partners of oars,
> And partners of pumps,
> On thwart and at thole,
> If help any be needed.

"Agreed on even terms one with another, as son with father, or father with son, in all our dealings. Now, shake hands on our peace-telling, and so let us all keep firmly these pledges by will of the Gods, and witness of all men who have now heard our pledges. May he have the Gods' love who keeps all these pledges, and he have the Gods' wrath who breaks lawful pledges. Now we are atoned

with our whole hearts, and may the Gods be atoned with all of us!"

As Earl Hacon ended this solemn form which he intoned in a sing-song voice, he held out his right hand to each of the hooded strangers, who shook it in token that they had accepted the pledges he had granted.

"Now," he said almost angrily, "away with your cloaks and up with your hoods. Were ye the worst Vikings of all the Jomsburgers ye were now reconciled to us, and taken into our peace in the sight of all men."

"So be it," said both the strangers in one breath, as they threw away their disguise, and stood before the Earl and his sons and chiefs, well known to all as Vagn and Beorn.

The first to break silence amid the general amazement was the gallant Eric.

"Well done Vagn, and well done old Beorn. You have fairly caught my father in his own snare. Now are ye both reconciled to him and all Norway, and taken into his peace with the witness of all men."

"'Tis true what Eric says," broke in the Earl; "but I never weened in one day to take

two of my worst enemies into my peace. Tell me why stirred you from Eric's booth, where ye were in his peace, till he could take you with him East down the land."

"'Twas dull, Earl, in yon booth," said Beorn, "and so we thought we would break out and see your sports."

"My foster-father speaks sooth," said Vagn. "We came to see—and, if we were taken into your peace, to share in—your sports."

"Share in our sports!" said the Earl, with half a sneer. "Art thou good at sports?"

"Away in Jomsburg," said Vagn, "I was said to be good at them. How it may be here in Norway I know not."

"That shall soon be tried," said the Earl. "In what sport wilt thou match thyself against my men—in running or in wrestling?"

"In either," said Vagn.

"Thou shalt be tried in both, and in both against the fastest runner and the stoutest wrestler that has ever come into this land. Sigmund, Brestir's son, stand out and try first thy speed and then thy strength of back and loins against this Viking."

By this time—so great was the round the two Vikings had taken—the sports were nearly over; but the match between the two greatest champions of the age revived the flagging interest of the crowd of spectators.

The sloping mead in which the sports were held formed a sort of natural terrace about half an English mile in length and about a hundred yards in breadth. At each end a pole had been set up, and round these the competitors in the foot-races had to run.

When Sigmund and Vagn had thrown off their outer clothing and put on light brogues, Earl Hacon called out to them, or rather to the Viking captain—

"Hark you, Gangrel Vagn, seest thou yon pole at the far end? Round that thou hast to run twice, returning and doubling the pole at this end. Now take your places, and I will start you myself."

They were both quickly in their place. "One, two, three, and away!" cried the Earl; and away went the two like arrows from a bow.

"Sigmund will give a good account of this

game-cock, Eric. I will wager this gold ring with thee, that he wins this race."

"Done, father," cried Eric. "A man should always wager on those whom he has taken into his peace."

By this time the rivals had reached the first lap of half a mile; and, to the Earl's delight, Sigmund turned the pole a little ahead of Vagn.

"I told thee, Eric, Sigmund would win. Shall I let thee off thy wager?"

"Not so, father," said Eric. "Half a mile is not two miles."

For a mile, and until they turned the pole in the back lap, Sigmund held his own, and even increased his lead; but as he finished the first mile, it was plain to all but the Earl that he was running above his natural pace, while Vagn had not as yet put forth his full speed.

This was plainer still when they had run a mile and a half; for just as they turned the further pole for the second time, Vagn, as we should now say, spurted, and, passing Sigmund easily, was soon a yard or two a-head. The rest of the race is soon told:—that yard or two soon became three, four, five, and six; and

though Sigmund spurted desperately, and at one time reduced his rival's lead a little, the result was that Vagn came in an easy winner, and all the beholders, except the Earl, owned that he looked as though he could have run two more miles with ease.

As for the Earl, he was much vexed. "Any boy," he roared out, "can win a foot-race against a man. Boys are fleeter on their feet. Now let them wrestle; in that feat of strength, Sigmund is sure to win."

After a short rest, during which their mouths were washed out with mead, the two champions took their stand on the wrestling ground, a smooth bit of sward in the midst of the meadow.

Those who have seen wrestling in Cumberland, as it has been handed down from the Northmen settled in that county, will know how graceful a trial of strength that sport is.

For a while the pair eyed one another, Sigmund having, to outward look, a slight advantage in weight and muscle. In stature they were equally matched, an even six feet four. Then coming to close quarters, each placed his

arms round the other's waist, or over his shoulders, feeling where they could lock their hands together and take hold to the best advantage; for, in that Northern style, the wrestle does not begin till the hands of each champion are fast locked over the back of his antagonist, after which a fall must follow, or, if either unlocks his hands, he is considered to have lost the fall. For a while the two felt cautiously with unlocked hands all over the other's back and loins, seeking out a weak spot.

At last Sigmund took hold and tried to throw Vagn; but the young Viking, rising on his feet as lithely as a snake, seemed to grow tall and tower above his antagonist, and so eluded his grasp. Then locking his own hands he fairly lifted the Fareyinger above his head, and hurled him backwards to the ground, with a fearful fall.

"Well thrown, Vagn, by Thor!" cried Eric in delight, while the Earl stood by anything but pleased.

"'Tis but the first out of three falls," he cried; "Sigmund will try again and do better."

And Sigmund did try again, and did do

better; but such was the agility and skill of Vagn, that with his utmost strength he could only in the second bout throw him a dog-fall, which counted for nothing.

Then came the third and final bout, and both men put forth all their skill and strength. If Vagn won this, he would have thrown Sigmund twice out of three times, and won the day. If Sigmund threw him, it would be one fall to one, and as the dog-fall went for nothing there must be a fourth bout.

Never in the North had there been seen such a tussle as this third bout. As one of the old warriors said, "It was like Thor's wrestle with the Cat in Utgard":—so much strength did Sigmund put forth, and so utterly foiled was he by the lissomness of Vagn's back and loins. At last, when Sigmund had worn himself out with attempts to throw Vagn, off whose sinews his grasp slipped as off an eel, Vagn on a sudden stiffened as it were, and, putting forth a giant's strength, caught the Fareyinger up by the waist, and held him off his feet. All looked for a repetition of the throw over his head; and Sigmund expecting this, threw himself back,

and so exposed a weak point to his antagonist, of which he was not slow to avail himself. In an instant Sigmund was flying through the air backwards, falling flat on his back; for Vagn had hurled him forwards instead of backwards, and by his resistance Sigmund had, in fact, helped much to throw himself. Against such skill and strength there could be no voice raised. On all sides rang the cry, "Well done, Viking," few knowing even the name of the young champion who had thus repeatedly worsted one of the greatest athletes of the North.

"By all the Gods, a gallant throw," cried the Earl. "Such wrestling we have never yet seen. The fates are against thee, Sigmund," he said, as the tall Fareyinger limped past. "Take this ring as a guerdon for thy skill. Against such a champion it is no disgrace to fail."

"Well it would be, father," said the ever ready Eric, "if such champions were taken at once into thy service."

Earl Hacon was a politic ruler, and answered his son with—

"And how could this Viking serve us, and would he take service if it was offered him?"

"That is soon answered," said Eric. "Come hither, Vagn;" and when the noble Viking stood before him and his father, he asked—

"Hast thou not a part of thy vow unfulfilled?"

"I have," said Vagn with a blush. "I vowed to marry Ingibeorg, Thorkell's daughter, down in the Bay, or not to leave Norway alive."

"Now, father," said Eric, "it is yours to speak. May he wed the girl, as your liegeman's daughter — the maiden is in thy hand?"

"I would sooner have given her to an inborn man," said the Earl; "but since this Viking is such a champion, and since you wish it, son Eric, I say he may have the lass; and as I never like to make two bites of a cherry, I say also he may have Thorkell of Leira's estates and office, and be my liegeman, down east in the Bay, so long as he pleases. He will not find it after all a bed of roses—this

marriage-bed of his; for that border-land is full of Vikings as bad as any that hail from Jomsburg. But after all it is only the old story over again, 'Set a thief to catch a thief.'"

"Thanks, lord Earl," said Vagn, and "Thanks, father," said Eric.

"I want no thanks just now," said the Earl merrily, "I want meat and drink. Come now, all of you, up to the Grange, and eat and drink and be jovial. To-morrow, Eric, you must go south with your men, and bear the news of this great victory down the coast, and Vagn and Beorn and his Vikings can go with thee. And now enough, for this day, of toil and work. Let us hasten to the hall."

"That was not such bad counsel of mine, foster-child, was it?" said old Beorn to Vagn.

"It was not, indeed," said Vagn; "and now if I can only get Ingibeorg."

"Plague take that girl," roared out old Beorn. "One can never get a word out of you but 'If I can only get Ingibeorg.'"

"See," said Vagn. "The Icelander Einar Scaleclang stands before the Earl and is about to sing."

It was so. There stood Einar, who with a loud voice asked Earl Hacon to listen to

ERLEND'S DEATH SONG.

"What dreams!" Odin spoke;
"Methought ere day broke
I garnished Valhalla
For gloryful folk;
Fast up from the fray
Flitted forms of the fey.
I wakened the warriors,
I warned them to rise,
Benches to furnish,
Beer-stoups to burnish;
Valkyries bore wine-cups
As though came a King.
Hither from mid-earth
This morning must part
Warriors of worth;
Expect them ere even,
Glad is my heart."

ODIN ASKS,—

"Say, Bragi! why under
Ten thousand doth thunder
Our rainbow-bridge? Answer
What bodeth this host?"

BRAGI ANSWERS,—

"Lintel and roof-tree, rafter and bar,
Settle in hall, else pillar and post,
As these men march onward, tremble and jar,
Quiver and quake, at tread of this host;

Hall-doors fly open, wall-weapons rattle;
In glory excelling,
From Hell's gloomy dwelling,
With whirlwind of battle
Our Balder comes back."

ODIN ANSWERS,—

"Unwisely now, Bragi,
Though wise, hast thou spoken;
Valhalla kens better,
Not Balder's this token,
For Erlend it groaneth,
I tell thee, his fall;
Each champion so trusty,
His liege lord bemoaneth,
With weapons war-rusty,
He wends to our hall."

AGAIN ODIN SPEAKS,—

"Sigmund and Sinfjotli,
Up with you lithely,
Out with you cheerily,
Erlend to greet;
Bid him in blithely—
See! he steps wearily—
All up the rain-arch,
Long is the day's march—
Hasten the hero on threshold to meet;
Dreary the journey
'Neath buckler and byrnie,
Hasten to hold up our chosen one's feet."

SIGMUND ASKS,—

"Why, Erlend, of all
Other chiefs must thou call?"

ODIN ANSWERS,—

"Because his brand ruddy
Clave helm after helm;
Because his blade bloody
Defended the realm."

SIGMUND ASKS,—

"Why snatch him then, father,
From fortune and glory?
Why not leave him rather
To fill up his story
On victory's path?"

ODIN ANSWERS,—

"Because no man knoweth,
When grey wolf so gory,
His grisly maw showeth
In Asgard's abode;
Therefore Odin calleth,
And Erlend fain falleth
To follow his liege lord, and fight for his God."

SIGMUND SPEAKS,—

"Hail to thee, Erlend, now,
Heartily welcome thou!
Enter, great Hacon's son,
Enter the hall;
I ask but this only,
What champions from far
Come with thee; not lonely
Thou surely hast hastened,
Leaving the battle where foemen fell chastened,
Hither to Odin from hurly of war?"

ERLEND SPEAKS,—

"Thanes five," Erlend said;
"Why dwell on each name?
I the sixth at their head
Fell greedy of fame:
Those thanes were all ours,
But our foemen to tell,
Quite passeth my powers,
By thousands they fell.
One name of this army,
Alone let me shout,—
'Tis the hero of Jomsburg,
Bold Bui the Stout."

Roars of applause followed the skald's verses. Even the Vikings joined in it heartily, for they felt that whatever praise was given to Erlend, exalted the glory of all who had shared in that bloody fight.

Earl Hacon was deeply moved, and slipping a ring of massive gold off his arm handed it to Einar.

"Thanks, lord," said the skald, "thou dost not bestow thy bounty by halves. This ring and my scales shall remain as heir-looms in my house in Iceland."

"So be it, Einar," said the Earl, "but I hope thou wilt never have to sing of another such battle in Norway."

After that the feast went on long and merrily, and it was late ere the Earl and his chiefs and their reconciled foemen sought their beds.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW EARL SIGVALD RETURNED HOME.

Now we will return to Earl Sigvald, and tell of his doings after he fled out of the Voe. With a fair wind, he steered out past the Her isles, and round Stad; and carrying the breeze with him, which seemed to shift as his course needed it, he ran swiftly down the coast of Norway, keeping the outer channel, and not hugging the coast as in his voyage Northward. We need hardly say that when he reached the Naze, he lost no time in seeking the recesses of "the Bay," but steered for the coast of Jutland, straight across the Cattegat. In close company sailed his brother, Thorkell the Tall, and Bui's brother, Sigurd the Champion, though he, with his ships, held themselves aloof from the captain, whose retreat had lost him their respect.

But the rest—some seventeen or eighteen ships—had formed part of the central squadron

which Sigvald had led into battle, and in their voyage home they still looked on him as their commander.

During the expedition, Astrida had sat in Scania, in Strut-Harold's Grange, anxious for tidings of her husband and the Vikings, but hearing none after they had left "the Bay," and sailed up along the Norwegian coast. Day after day, as the days wore on, she mounted the hill near the Grange, and looked up the Sound towards the Cattegat and the coast of Jutland, vainly trying to descry her husband's sails.

The only answer she made to herself day after day was, "He cometh not: he cometh not;" and at last, as days lengthened into weeks, she had scarce the heart to climb the hill, which she had once mounted so full of hope.

But on a bright December day, one of her hand-maidens brought the good news that the sails of a fleet were to be seen coming south through the Sound.

We need not say that Astrida flew to the hill, and saw what she took at first to be the

van-guard of the Viking fleet. Turning to her hand-maiden, she said—

"They sail very scatter-wise in coming back, if, indeed, these few ships be part of the host. Not so was Sigvald wont to sail, with miles between the squadrons of his host."

Then, after a while, both mistress and maid exclaimed—

"These be all, if they be Vikings. Let us count them," added Astrida, and so the maid counted the ships.

"One, two, three—eighteen in front, and six behind, that makes twenty-four."

"It cannot be any part of Earl Sigvald's fleet," said Astrida, "and yet whose else can it be? The winter night is long passed, and none but Vikings of Jomsburg would keep the sea at this season."

"In a little while, lady," said the hand-maiden, "we shall be able to speak, of a surety. They be tall ships, and they come bravely on."

"Let us wait then," said Astrida. So they waited, with their eyes fixed on the approaching ships.

At last, screening her eyes with her hands, Astrida exclaimed—

"It is the Earl's ship; I see his standard at the mast head, and I know the 'Bison' by her shape and size and build."

"It is the Earl's ship, indeed," said the maid; "and if so, of course the Earl is safe aboard her."

"Safe! who talks of safety," said Astrida. "Where should Earl Sigvald be but on board his own ship? But let us haste to make them welcome. In an hour they will be in the bay down yonder."

Down she flew to the Grange, and, like a good housewife, set all things in order for her husband's coming. What roasting and boiling and making of porridge and girdle cakes, what casks of ale and mead were broached, and how all the rude resources of those times were brought to bear on the coming feast, need not be repeated.

Ever and anon Astrida and her handmaidens ran out of doors to see how near the fleet was, and when they saw them doubling one of the arms of the bay they were almost beside them-

selves with joy—for were not the sweethearts of her handmaidens on board those ships with Earl Sigvald?

"Just in time," said Astrida. "Everything is ready for their welcome, though we had little breathing-time. Now let us hasten to the shore to welcome the Earl."

Whether Astrida stayed to put on her best dress or to tire her head is not recorded. All that is known is, that when Earl Sigvald set foot on shore out of his boat—there stood Astrida on the shore ready to receive him.

"Welcome, a thousand welcomes, Sigvald, my Earl," said the fond wife. "How glad I am to have thee back safe and sound. But before you go a step further, tell me how have you sped; and have you turned Earl Hacon out of his realm, and now come back first before the host to bring us news of this great victory?"

If ever a man was hard put to it for an answer to his wife, that man was Earl Sigvald that day.

"Let us begin from the beginning and not from the end," he said, as he walked slowly

with his wife up to the Grange. "In the first place we made 'the Bay.'"

"I know all about that," said Astrida; "we have heard long ago how ye landed in the Bay and sacked Tunsberg and wasted the land; but what happened after you sailed North, and whether ye so much as saw Earl Hacon face to face? of all that we know nothing."

"Well," said Earl Sigvald, "we made the Bay, as you say, and sailed North; and at last after many days we met Earl Hacon in Hjoringsvoe with a fleet of three hundred ships, all well manned."

"Three hundred ships? and you had but one hundred and fifty. These were fearful odds."

"That is just what it was," said the Earl. "We thought to catch Earl Hacon napping, and he caught us."

"Then you have not caught him, and he still sits on the throne of Norway?" said Astrida.

"He sat there when I left him," said Sigvald, moodily, "and no doubt he sits there still."

"Then you lost the battle?" said Astrida, shortly.

"We lost it indeed," said Sigvald.

"Tell me all about it, and how it was," said Astrida.

"We met them in Hjoringsvoe, as I told you," said the Earl, "at early morning, and all that day we fought with them till the day began to fall. At first we had much the best of it, and Bui even broke their line; but the valour of the young Earls, Eric and Sweyn, restored the fight, and at last about mid-day there was a lull."

"That was bad," said Astrida, drily. "You should have pushed on and given them no rest, then you would have won the day."

"You are more right even than you think," said Sigvald. "For, in that rest and breathing time, Earl Hacon sacrificed his son Erlend to the Gods in whom he trusts; and when we renewed the fight in the afternoon those Gods fought visibly against us. Till then the day had been bright and clear; but all at once it turned to mist and cloud, and then showers of

hail drove in our teeth, and every hailstone weighed two ounces."

"Those were big hailstones," said Astrida: "we had no such hailstones in the Wendish land."

"But the worst is still to come," said Sigvald. "Those in our fleet who had the second sight saw things in heaven, and even on Earl Hacon's ship, far worse than any hailstones. There, amid the showers, were seen two woman-shapes, with outstretched arms and pointing fingers; and, as they pointed their fingers, arrows flew from them; and every arrow was a man's bane."

"So you fought against women as well as men," said Astrida; "was that so very dreadful?"

"Aye—but these women were Valkyries and not flesh and blood alone," said Sigvald.

"Valkyries—we have no such things in the Wends," said Astrida; "there all our women are flesh and blood. But tell me what came after the women fought against you?"

"Finding that the Gods fought against us," said Sigvald, "and that it was no good con-

tending against them when we looked to meet men, I gave the orders to back out of the battle and to retreat."

"And you retreated? and what became of Bui and Vagn, and the rest? Did they retreat with you?"

"Not when I left. They still fought on."

"And what became of them and all the host?"

"I cannot speak of my own knowledge; but next morning, after we had reached Stad, Sigurd the Champion, Bui's brother, joined us; and he said that Bui had been slain and all his men, and that the whole host was routed. When Bui was slain, Sigurd had no vow left to fulfil; so he turned and went out of the battle."

"But you, Sigvald, had you no vow to fulfil? I thought you vowed to pull down Earl Hacon, or to leave your bones in Norway?"

"I did—that was my vow."

"And why left you not your bones in Norway, and why turned you thus with shame out of the battle?"

"I cannot say," said Sigvald; "save that

my vow was made to fight with men, and not with Fiends and Trolls."

"The board is spread," said Astrida, as they entered the hall of the Grange; "and now fall to your food, Earl Sigvald, with all the appetite in your power."

So Earl Sigvald and his men sat down to their meal, and ate largely and drank deep. Long fires blazed down the hall; and over it, while the horns passed to and fro, strange stories were told of the voyage to Norway and of the battle in the Voe.

It seemed to be a race whether the teller should stretch his lips or the listener open his mouth widest.

As for the battle, it was won, men said, entirely by witchcraft and uncanny arts. Till Earl Hacon called in the aid of Trolls, all went well with the Vikings: after the unseen and yet well-seen Powers came into the field, all the valour of men was hopeless.

"But was the Earl right to turn and fly and forget his vow, and leave the rest to fight it out?" asked an old Viking who had stayed in Scania.

"I heard him," said one of Sigvald's bowmen, who had fought foremost on the forecastle, "I heard him call out to Bui and Vagn both, as we ran out of the fight, that it was no good fighting against Trolls and Fiends. That was a wink to them to follow their leader."

"And what did Bui and Vagn say to that?" asked the old Viking.

"Well," said the other rather puzzled, "Bui said nothing; and we could see his face as we ran under his stern glowing with all the rage of battle, and still ready to fight on."

"So like Bui," cried the old Viking. "Bornholm for ever! In that fair island I was born and bred. But what said Vagn?"

"Oh!" answered the other, "not much, but still much to the point, as a man might say. Under his stern we passed too; and when the Captain hailed him, he sprang up on the rail at the stern, and shouted out,—'Why flyest thou, most currish of dogs, and leavest thy men at this pinch? Shame take thee!' That was what he said—and now comes the point: up he caught a spear and hurled it at our helmsman, and right through him it crashed, and he

thought it must be Sigvald steering his own ship; but for all that it was not the Captain, for he had just given up the helm and taken an oar to warm him after the showers of hail and the biting north wind."

"That was a brave speech and a lucky shot—so like Vagn," said the old Viking. "Bui is dead, you say; but what became of Vagn?"

"Who can tell?" said the other. "Most likely food for fishes in the sea or ravens on land."

"Now, shall I tell thee something?" said the old Viking: "a bit of my mind, as men say."

"Out with it," said the other, handing him the horn across the fire, "and thy whole mind, not only a bit of it; for the whole is better than the half, much more than a bit."

The old Viking, whose weather-beaten face and scarred brow betokened an old sea-dog who had roved the seas with Palnatoki and Beorn, looked steadfastly at his companion, and said,—

"If you must have my whole mind, it is that Earl Sigvald, and all of you who fled away out of the battle, and left the rest of the

band in the lurch, are a pack of cowards and cravens, and no longer worthy to belong to the fellowship that Palnatoki founded in Jomsburg."

In those days such outspoken words, even if true, would have led to what, in modern times, we politely call a breach of the peace. The younger Viking would have thrown the rest of the mead into his elder's face, the veteran would have returned the compliment, and they would have retired to fight the quarrel out. But, strange to say, the younger Viking had the good sense to bear the blame thus thrown on him meekly.

All the answer he made, was—

"I am not sure thou art not right, grandfather," he said, "and if thou wert a younger man I might fall to blows with thee. But for this once, at least, I have had fighting enough, just as the Captain thought when he turned out of the battle. As for what thou sayest of me, I am at least a true Viking of Jomsburg, in this, that I obey orders. When the Captain bade us turn and fly, what else could we do than do his bidding?"

"That is very true," said the other, "on him be the blame. And now let us say nothing more about it, but drink Strut-Harold's mead as deeply as we can."

This is only one of the scenes that were passing in the hall, and it represented very nearly the feeling of those who stayed behind and those who had thus returned.

All through the meal, Earl Sigvald sat moodily in his high-seat, while his brother Thorkell sat over against him, in no better mood. The huge Viking thought if he had fulfilled his vow, his brother, whom he dearly loved, most certainly had not, and that was enough to fill his proud heart with pain and grief. The two brothers drained the horns when brought to them, but there were no pledges, and certainly no vows. When the meal was over, Astrida and her women came and sat on the dais, and soon afterwards Sigvald left his high-seat, and went up to her.

"I am weary and wayworn and sea-tossed," he said. "I would I were in my bed."

"Glad as I am to welcome thee back," said Astrida, "'tis too early for bed, even though

these winter days be short. Something, too, is needful to thee besides bed. I have made ready a bath, and into that thou shalt go, and bathe thy weary limbs; and I will go with thee into the bath-room, and see that all is as nice for thee as I could wish."

"Thanks, Astrida," said Sigvald. "Thou hast well guessed, there is nothing that is so welcome to a weary man as a warm bath."

"So I thought," said Astrida; "and another thing I thought. I thought that after such a long way as this voyage of thine back from Norway, though thou camest back much faster than thou wentest, it must be high time to sponge and wash those wounds which you got in the battle. Come, let us go; the bath is ready."

So Sigvald rose and left the hall, and Astrida went with him into the bath-room; and having seen that all was ready to his hand, left him there, saying—

"When thou hast come out of thy bath, Sigvald, I will come back to dress thy wounds."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks," said Sigvald, as she went.

In due time Astrida returned, and, tapping at the door, was let into the bath-room by her husband.

"I am so fond of thee," she said, "that I cannot bear any other woman should dress thy wounds. I will not suffer one of our old crones, whose business is leechcraft, to come nigh thee. And now I will dress thee and them."

So she rubbed his stalwart arms and chest and feet, and rubbed on a while in silence, for she could find never a scratch on any limb.

At last she said, shaking her pretty head—

"I trow there are some among our band of Vikings who were in the battle who came out of it with a rougher skin than this that thou hast brought back; for, to tell the truth, it seems fitter to be powdered with wheatmeal than with aught else."

At these words Earl Sigvald looked at her sternly, and said—

"This, then, is what thy love drives thee to say, Astrida. If thou caredst for me as a true wife, thou wouldst think, perhaps, that it

is my fate and not my fault that thou hast not this time too, to boast of a victory won by me."

"We Wends never won a victory without a wound," said Astrida, haughtily; "and so I weened it was the way of you Vikings, but I was mistaken; and this is why I would let no other woman come nigh thee, that I could not bear that anyone else but myself should know that Earl Sigvald, the Captain of Jomsburg, had gone into the Battle of Hjoringsvoe and come out of it without a wound, when so many other brave men met their death."

After that she left him to himself, and it is not recorded that they ever afterwards spoke of the battle.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW VAGN MARRIED INGIBEORG.

THE morning after the day on which Vagn and the Vikings had been taken into the Earl's peace, while the rest of the Norwegian host were busy burying the dead, Earl Eric, with six ships of his own, among which towered the tall "Ironsides," rowed out of the Voe to carry the glad tidings of the victory down the coast. To this force was added Vagn's ship, which, having been caulked, was manned with the fifty of the Vikings who had escaped out of the battle, and fifty more whom the generosity and fame of Eric as well as his own procured him. Beorn, of course, went with him, abandoning with a pang the stout ship which had borne him so trustily through sea-fight and storm.

"There she lies, the beauty, the jewel!" he said, sorrowfully, as they passed her in running

out. "Better bark never swam on sea. Good-bye, sweetheart!"

As they rounded Stad, and passed the mouth of firth after firth, which run up into the Norway mainland, and as they neared island after island, boats and ships put off to learn the news, and shouts and cheers rent the air when men heard—and they were mostly old men who had stayed behind—how that proud Viking fleet which they had seen but a few days since sailing and rowing so grandly by their homesteads had been destroyed.

Up the firths, and all over the countless islands which fringe the Norwegian coast, the news of joy flew like Loki's wild-fire, and soon all the dwellers on the sea-board knew that Earl Hacon had won a glorious victory.

So Eric and his squadron proceeded till they made the Naze. Then they made a bend into "the Bay," sailing in company so far as the site of the wasted Tunsberg, whence Eric, with his ships, was to cut across the Bay to the King's Crag, a royal Grange, whither it will be remembered that Thorkell of Leira

had gone to a wedding on the night when Vagn had meant to surprise him.

One of the young Earl's trustiest men was to go with Vagn to Leira, that he might assure Ingibeorg, now her father's heiress, that it was Earl Hacon's will and pleasure that she should wed his liegeman, Vagn.

As Vagn's ship parted company from Eric's squadron in the dusk of a December day, the young Earl stood on the poop of the "Ironsides," and, hailing Vagn, said—

"All health and happiness to thee, Vagn, Aki's son; and good luck in thy wedding! Give this token to thy fair bride." And as he uttered the words, he held out a spear, the point of which reached over Vagn's bulwarks, and down the shaft of which glided a golden ring.

"Thanks, many thanks, Earl Eric!" cried Vagn, as he stooped to pick up the precious gift. "It gladdens my heart that I shall now fulfil my vow."

"There he goes," said Beorn, "as gallant an Earl, and as generous, too, as ever stepped deck. If he ever comes to fill his father's throne, he will rule Norway like a King."

As they neared the little river which led up to the Grange at Leira, and ran into the creek which had sheltered them a month or so ago, Vagn could not help exclaiming—

"Just on such a night we ran in here to kill Thorkell, carry off his daughter, and spoil his goods. Two of those things have been done, and now we return, Earl Hacon's friends and liegemen, to accomplish the third."

"That is all very well, foster-child," said the old Viking; "but if that is all thou canst see in this fog, I can see more, though I have not the gift of second sight."

"What more canst thou see?" asked Vagn.

"I can see," said the old Viking, "that ships have run in here, and not so long ago. Here lies a hawser with the strands of rope freshly snapped. Yonder lie the remains of a meal, and the embers, too; and, more than that, they are warm."—As he said this, he stooped to touch them.

"So it is," said Vagn: "ships have been here, and they must have gone up the river, or we should have sighted them had they put out

into the Bay. What is to be done now, foster-father?"

"To be done, boy,—why to go to work warily, get out our arms, and make everything snug, as if we were going into battle. When that is done, row up boldly to the Grange, and see what comes of it. All the Vikings of Jomsburg are not yet dead."

"But what think you these strangers are?" asked Vagn.

"Who can tell?" said Beorn. "Vikings, and red Vikings like ourselves, perhaps come to spoil Thorkell's house while he is away. That we know they cannot do. We got his gold, and that is now in Earl Hacon's treasure-house, all except a little which I have stowed away in my belt."

"Vikings!" cried Vagn. "Then fair Ingibeorg is in danger; let us go at once."

"But they may not be Vikings after all. They may be the Earl's men like ourselves; and, therefore, friends."

"Let us go as soon as ever we can—as soon as ever we have got out our war gear."

With all his eagerness, this took a little

time; but, at last, when the night had already fallen, their ship reached the spot on the stream opposite to Thorkell's Grange.

Even before they made the landing-place, Vagn's fears were half confirmed by the shouts and cries which reached their ears in the darkness.

"I can't see to run in, foster-child," said Beorn. "One ship or two already lies off the bridge."

"Run alongside them," cried Vagn, "and let us board them and take them one after the other."

So said so done. Beorn ran their ship under the stern of one of the ships, and Vagn and his Vikings leapt on to her poop out of their own, looking for their unseen enemy; while Beorn, with the rest, followed, only leaving two men to guard their ship.

"Here be the ships," said Vagn; "but where are the crews?"

"There is not a man to be seen on board either of them."

"So much the better," said Beorn. "They are ours without strife, lawful prizes to

Earl Hacon and his liegeman, Vagn, Aki's son."

"Hark to those cries from the house," said Vagn. "Let us hasten on. I heard a woman shriek."

Passing over the boarded ships, Vagn and Beorn and ninety men made at full speed for the Grange.

Those who had preceded them, whether friends or foes, had acted as unwarily at the house itself as they had behaved at the landing-place. The massive doors, both outer and inner, were unbarred and without a warder; and, as good luck would have it, Vagn and his men rushed at once into the house.

"'Tis better thus," he whispered to Beorn, "than to hold the doors and burn them."

"Better far," said Beorn. "Besides, there is no use in burning one's bride."

As they forced their way into the hall, a scene presented itself which must have moved even the rugged Beorn to pity.

All down the hall blazed log fires, and at the boards, full spread with food, sat a motley crew of more than one hundred men, whose

behaviour stamped them for Vikings of the worst class. In Thorkell's high-seat sat a huge champion, whose red and matted hair and brutal face showed that he was one of the wildest and rudest of his class. Over against him sat a second, even more repulsive in look —a tall, brawny man, whose shock-head was grizzled, but whose bare arms showed muscles moulded as in iron. On either side of each of them sat companions well suited to such leaders, and all were armed to the teeth.

At the very nick of time, Vagn and his foster-father had arrived. Having feasted on the best, the Vikings had just called for their first horn of mead—ale had already flowed freely; and, with flushed face and loud voice, the leader of the band had just called on Thorkell's daughter to hand him the horn, and to pledge him in it.

"To-night," he cried, "this very night, I mean to wed fair Ingibeorg; and this is my form of marriage—that I pledge her in the horn. As for the other women, my men may marry them if they please; but none I know will care to marry that gaunt old hag yonder. Her I mean to bake before the fire till she tells us what

Thorkell of Leira has done with his gold. Come hither, fair maiden," he added in a coaxing tone to Ingibeorg, who stood huddled with all the other women on the dais, "come hither and pledge your Viking bridegroom. With this axe I thee wed;" and, as he said this, he smote his heavy weapon with a great crash on the rail in front of the high-seat.

The last words were on his lips when Vagn dashed up the hall in advance of his men, and exclaiming—

"With this sword I thee slay," he first avoided, by leaping on one side, a blow which the Viking captain made at him; and, in the next moment, dealt him a side stroke on the neck, which sent his huge head, with its matted locks and flushed features, rolling on the floor.

While this was passing on that side of the hall, Beorn had singled out the second in command, who, springing up from his seat, had gained the floor, and rushed to meet him. The younger of the two, and a good swordsman, the robber was not to be overcome, even by the veteran Beorn, in an instant. For a while naught was heard but the clash of swords, as

man after man singled out an antagonist, and a general conflict arose throughout the hall. In this *mêlée* Vagn made for the dais, that he might shield Ingibeorg from assault or attack, striking down on his way one or two of the enemy who threw themselves in his way.

"Lady!" he cried, "I come to save thee! Fear not," as he saw her gazing in terror at his sword dripping with the Viking's blood.

"To save me?" said Ingibeorg; "I know thee not."

"But I know him," said Bergthora:—"he is the man who spoiled my master's house, last autumn."

"True," cried Vagn; "but who, for all that, I come to save you all."

By this time Beorn, though at first hard pressed by his younger adversary, had disabled him at last by a sweeping stroke which took off his leg just above the knee. As the Viking stood staring at his lost limb, Beorn followed up his advantage by a thrust through the breast, which brought his enemy to the ground.

"There lie," he cried, "and learn not to touch things which do not belong to thee:" a sentiment which came with great unction from Beorn's lips, a man who all his life long had been disregarding the distinction between "mine" and "thine."

While the leaders were thus engaged, the conflict had been raging between the rank and file all along the hall. Seeing their men pressed by the superior numbers of the foe, who numbered in all one hundred and twenty men, Vagn and Beorn now came to their aid; and man after man of the robbers went down before their sturdy blows. The loss, however, was not all on one side—several of Vagn's Norwegian followers, and two or three of his Vikings, bit the dust. But the tide of battle turned at last against the enemy, and then as many of them as could reach the door made a rush for it and fled.

"Up and after them in the darkness, Beorn," cried Vagn. "Do not let them gain their ships, but drive them into the woods. Kill as many of them as thou canst, and then seize and guard their ships and ours. I will stay by

Ingibeorg and clear the hall of all this carrion."

"All right, boy," said Beorn, most cheerfully. "Thou art right to stay by thy bride, and as for me I like fighting better than women; and so I will follow the foe and give them no rest."

"A word," said Vagn, "before you go. Say never a word as to the manner of Thorkell's death. Let Ingibeorg, for a time at least, only know me as her deliverer."

"Never fear, I will not betray secrets or spoil sport," said Beorn. "Only I beg of you to have the marriage over as soon as possible."

With these words they parted,—Beorn to worry the foe, and Vagn to console Ingibeorg, who, unlike many modern young ladies, had not fainted, but stood pale as death clutching Bergthora's gown on the dais.

As the fight was going on, she whispered to her old nurse—

"It seems to me all a dream,—I scarce know which are our friends and which our foes."

"Our friend is yon tall youth with the

golden locks and ruddy face. He has come to save thee and us, as you heard him say."

"But why, why should he risk his life to save me?"

"Let him speak for himself," said Bergthora, as, when the hall was cleared of the living Vikings, she saw Vagn approaching.

As he stood before her in all the glory of his manly beauty, Ingibeorg—herself the fairest of all the maidens in the Bay—could not help being touched. With a deep blush she turned to him and said—

"Fair sir, I thank thee for having saved us from insult and death. What is thy name; and what happy chance has brought thee to this Grange?"

"I came hither, fair Ingibeorg, to see thee, nor is this my first visit. My name is Vagn, the son of Aki, and my home is Jomsburg."

"Vagn of Jomsburg," said Ingibeorg; "then I too have seen thee before—a year or two ago, when you and your men surprised me in the wood. I scarce knew thee till now."

"I come hither, lady," said Vagn, "to plead my cause, and to beg for thy hand, with Earl

Hacon's will. He and I are now reconciled, and I am his liegeman in these parts."

"My hand," said Ingibeorg, sternly, "belongs only to my father Thorkell to give; and here in these parts we know of no other liegeman of Earl Hacon than Thorkell of Leira."

"Alas! lady," said Vagn, "I must be the bearer of bad tidings. Thy father, Thorkell of Leira, fell at Hjoringsvoe, after the great battle; and I am now, by grace of Earl Hacon, his successor in the Bay, and armed with all his power."

"Bad tidings, indeed," cried Ingibeorg, "my father dead; and you, his successor, and Earl Hacon's liegeman, and my suitor. These are hard things for a maid like me to hear all at once, even from one who has saved her life and honour. For that boon I thank thee with all my heart; but, for the rest, I must have time to mourn my father's loss before I give thee my answer to thy suit."

With these words she retired gracefully with her women to her bower, while Vagn gazed after her lost in love and admiration.

"More lovely than ever," he said to himself.

"What is more lovely?" cried old Beorn. "Battle? So it is. See these corpses all of a row. That I call a good night's work. Here you thralls, bear them out of doors and sweep and sand the floor; and then bring us meat and drink, for we are hungry and weary after our toil."

The thralls did as Beorn bade them, and as Vagn and Beorn sat with their men over the fire in the hall at Leira, the old Welchman gave the young lover this sound piece of advice.

"Though I was married once I have not had much to do with women, but for all that I know them. Don't you hurry this young maiden, Ingibeorg the Fair you call her, and fair she is of a truth. But, I say, don't hurry her: give her time to weep her fill for her father, whom she loved; and when the old love has been consoled by tears she will be all the more inclined for the new. Give her time and she will fall into your arms: be too hot and hasty and she flee from you. I know you might marry her this very night by force. That was what that shockheaded

Viking wished to do; but maidens love to be wooed and not wedded by force. Give her time, I say; and you will fulfil your vow, and have a cheerful and a happy wife."

"I will take thy counsel, foster-father," said Vagn; and he took it.

Day after day he lived on at the Grange with his men, looking to the Earl's business, but never uttering a word of love. At last, fair Ingibeorg began to wonder why Vagn stayed there at all and never spoke to her one word of love—to her, the pride of all the Bay.

Even then we know not that Vagn would have spoken, had not old Beorn made the gaunt Bergthora, who played the part of a Duenna, sound her foster-child, and so break the ice.

But when the ice was once broken, love grew warm on both sides; and the end of it was that Ingibeorg, at the end of a month, was quite willing to marry Vagn, whom she now thought by far the noblest and handsomest man she had ever seen.

So Vagn had fulfilled both parts of his vow, and had succeeded in winning favour in the eyes of the girl, whose father had fallen by his hand.

CHAPTER XX.

LAST WORDS ABOUT EVERY ONE.

We have now brought our story to an end. Never, after that fatal voyage to Norway, did Jomsburg hold up her head as before. Sigvald returned thither, indeed, and conspired with the Swedes and Wends and Norwegians against King Olaf, Tryggvi's son, when they slew him on board the "Long Snake;" but mostly lived on with Astrida, in Scania, passing always for one of the wisest of men. Thorkell the Tall went back to the burg with a few ships, and became captain in his brother's stead. Under him the remnants of the famous free company went over in a body to England, when Sweyn, the Seamstress's son, fulfilled his vow, and became his mercenary troops, under the name of the Thingmannalid. There many of them perished in the massacre

of St. Brice's day; but the company still existed in the reigns of Canute and his sons, and in that of Edward the Confessor, having its head-quarters in London, where the church of St. Clement's Danes probably marks the site of its camp.

As for King Sweyn and Gunnhilda, the reader must imagine how glad at heart he was when he heard that the Vikings had been cut off by Earl Hacon. He was sure to gain, as he said, whichever way the victory went. The next year he fulfilled his vow, and setting out for England, wasted and conquered the country, driving out Ethelred the Unready into exile. After a short reign he died, leaving his crown and his conquest to his son Knut, a boy of ten years old.

Sigurd the Champion, as we have seen, retired from the battle at Hjoringsvoe, when, on Bui's death, he had no vow to fulfil. With his six ships, he made for Bornholm, and settled down on the heritage which his father, Veseti, had left. There he lived to a good old age, and passed for one of the best and bravest of men. His wife, Tofa, and he were now on the

best terms; and they had many children, all mighty men.

After a while, Vagn grew weary of serving Earl Hacon, as his liegeman in "the Bay," and gave up the service and went back to Fünen, taking his wife, Ingibeorg, with him. There he, too, lived long and happily. He was thought the boldest and most daring man of his time, and when he died he left many brave sons behind him.

Last of all we must speak of Earl Hacon. After that victory over the Vikings, his power grew so that he became more mighty than the mightiest King. But with power came pride, and wrong, and lust. He wronged the freemen, taking away their goods and wives, and breaking the privileges which all rulers before him had granted them. Then they rose against him, just as the young King Olaf, the son of Tryggvi, came to Norway to try his fortune as a claimant to the throne, and lawful heir of King Harold Fairhair.

The Earl at first despised the rising of the freemen; but his spies soon brought him word that the angry peasants were approaching in

overwhelming force; and the great Earl, Hacon "the Mighty," whose name the freemen now turned into "the Bad," fled before them. One by one his men dropped off from him, and at last he was left alone with the gloomy Kark, whose knife, as we have heard from his own lips, ever thirsted for Earl's blood. He had been long with the Earl, and it was said they were both of the same age to a day. Him the Earl had richly rewarded in the days of his prosperity; and if there was anyone in whom he might think he could rely, it was Kark, his thrall.

In his utmost need, the Earl and his companion now made for the house of Thora, one of his women friends, at Rimul in Gaulardale. On their way over the ice—for it was midwinter—Hacon forced his horse into a bit of open water, and left his cloak and sword on the frozen bank, that the freemen might think the ice had given way under him, and that he had perished. After that they took refuge for a time in a cave, but they could not stay there long, for the thrall as he slept was haunted by dreams, all of which the Earl interpreted

as portending death and ruin to both of them.

At last they came to Rimul; and the Earl sent Kark in to Thora, to beg her to come out and speak to him. She came, and he begged her to let him bide there for a few days till the peasants went home.

"This will be the very first place in which they will look for you," she said, "for they all know how dear we have been to each other."

Still he implored her to conceal him.

"Well!" she said, "there is one place here where they would never think of looking for such a great prince as thou art, and that is a pig-stye, half under ground."

As she said this she showed him the stye, which lay under a large boulder stone.

"This hiding-place is well thought of," said the Earl, "and I will get into it at once. Life is before everything else, and we must not mind if a place is not splendid. Get a spade, Kark, and dig a deep hole under the pig-stye," an order which the thrall had to obey. While he worked, Thora told the Earl that Olaf,

Tryggvi's son, had come into the land, and claimed the crown.

"Misfortunes never come single," said the Earl, as he stepped down with Kark into the pit. Thora handed down to them meat and drink and lights, and then she covered the pit over with loose planks, threw straw and dung over them, and let the pigs in. So she left them.

As Thora thought, it was not long before the freemen came to her house to look for Earl Hacon; and worse, they had joined their forces to those of Olaf, Tryggvi's son, and he too came with them. Out and in they searched the house, but never thought of looking beneath the pig-stye. Before they left the spot, Olaf called a meeting of the neighbours in the yard close to the stye, and climbing up on the big stone, he gave it out in a loud voice, which both the Earl and Kark heard as they lay below, that he would give a great reward to any man who would put an end to Earl Hacon the Bad.

After they were gone, the Earl looked at the thrall, and saw in the uncertain light that he changed colour.

"Why," he said, "art thou sometimes so pale and sometimes as black as turf? Is it not that thou meanest to betray me?"

"No, I will not," said Kark.

"We were born, men say," the Earl went on, "on one day, and it will be not long between our deaths. Beware!"

When night came, they ate together, and both drank out of one cup; but the Earl tried to keep awake, for he had no faith in the thrall. At last Kark fell asleep, and tossed about until the Earl woke him up and asked him what he had dreamt.

"I dreamt," said Kark, "that we were both on board one ship, and that I steered."

"That is a good sign," said the Earl. "It means that thou hast power both over my life and thine. Be true, therefore, and I will reward thee when better days come."

Again the thrall dreamt, and again the Earl asked for his dream.

"Methought," he said, "I came to the Barns, and saw Olaf, the son of Tryggvi, there, and he bound a necklace of gold round my throat."

"That betokens," said the Earl, "that Olaf, Tryggvi's son, will make them lay a red ring round thy throat if thou comest to him. Beware of him, therefore, and cling to me; and I will reward thee as of old."

From these dreams it is easy to see what thoughts were running in the thrall's head.

So they went on, both afraid of one another, and each watching the other, fearing to fall asleep. Thus the night wore on, but towards morning the Earl was overpowered by weariness and watching, and fell asleep. His sleep, as was not unnatural, was troubled. He screamed out loud, and now dashed his head and now his heels about, as though he were about to start up. Then Kark drew out his bitter knife, and said—

"Now the hour has come which I have so often felt must come, when this blade will taste Earl's blood; though I hardly thought it would be that of this Earl."

Then, after a pause—

"See how terrible he looks! Now is the time, now or never."

As he uttered these words, he flew on the

Earl, drove the knife into his throat, and then cut it from ear to ear.

"It is over," he cried, "over, over," and with that he spurned the body of the man who, though his master, had been also his friend.

Then he ate and drank, and, having sated hunger and thirst, returned to his prey, and with his knife hacked off the Earl's head.

"Now for the Barns," he cried, "to bear this head to Olaf, and claim the great reward."

He was not long in breaking out of the pit; and, as it was not far to the Barns, he brought his ghastly token thither late in the day.

"Is King Olaf here?" he asked at the door of the Grange, so lately the seat of Earl Hacon.

"The King is at meat," said the warder. "Walk in if you have aught to say, and tell him your errand."

In strode the dark thrall, holding a bag in his hand, and went at once up to the high-seat in which the young King sate.

"Hail, King," he cried, "I have a token for thee."

"For good or for ill?" said Olaf.

"For good, and here it is." As he said this, Kark thrust his hand into the bag and drew forth the head.

"Whose head is it?" said the King. "I know not the man."

"He was Earl Hacon the Mighty this morning," said the thrall. "I was with him in the pig-stye under the big stone on which you stood yesterday and offered a reward to any man who would put an end to Earl Hacon. I have put an end to him, and here is his head."

"Wert thou his man, or thrall, that thou wast with him in the stye?" asked King Olaf.

"I was his thrall," said Kark.

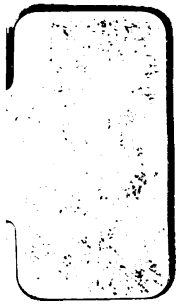
"And yet thou betrayedst him for gain," said the King. "But thou shalt have thy reward. Here, purse-bearer, pay this fellow a hundred marks."

Up came the purse-bearer and weighed out the money, while the thrall's eyes glistened at the shining heap. When it was counted out and weighed, Kark turned to go.

"Nay, nay," said the King, "that is the reward I promised; thou hast got it. Now it is my duty, as King of this land, to punish

traitors. Here, headsman, up with thine axe, lead him to the door, and hew off his head. Then let both their heads—the head of the Earl who betrayed the freemen, and the head of the thrall who betrayed his master—hang to-morrow on the highest gallows, that all who dwell in this land may know that I mean to rule by law and justice."

As the King commanded, so it was done; and that was the end of Earl Hacon the Bad, who conquered the Vikings, and of Kark the thrall, who betrayed his master.

THE END.

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